

“Before Covid, I was all about getting the kids into school. Education was a major thing. After Covid, I’m not going to lie to you, my take on attendance now is like I don’t really care anymore. Life’s too short.”

Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis

September 2023

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Foreword

This report is essential but sobering reading.

Quite simply, too many children are currently missing school to the extent that it affects the continuity of their learning. Disadvantaged pupils who most need the security, stability and care that good schools offer, are most likely to be persistently absent – and the gap is widening. The current data points to a full-blown national crisis – and this report’s findings help to explain why.

The link between attendance and attainment is well known. Sporadic attendance impacts children’s academic results, mental health and resilience. Those who take an occasional day (or a week, or a fortnight) off school miss building blocks of knowledge. Catching up is a treadmill that becomes unmanageable and so their learning is fractured.

A range of push and pull factors mean that the impetus to attend every day has been lost as parents wrangle with the cost-of-living crisis, their children’s fragile mental health, unmet special educational needs and post-Covid ‘new normal’ society. This report captures the voices of parents, many of whom are disgruntled with aspects of educational policy or school management. Their testimonies often convey a sense of betrayal by the system whose promises have not come to fruition. Frustratingly, many attempts to improve attendance have sometimes had the unintended consequence of alienating parents further.

The recommendations made by the report’s authors are wide-ranging and long-term. There is no quick fix to the national crisis of persistent absence. Furthermore, the solutions require a colossal society-wide drive. Schools cannot fix attendance on their own. They need the support of government and the voluntary sector to effect cultural change and make participation irresistible. Most of all they need the support of parents.

Of course, there are many schools who buck the trend and continue to secure excellent attendance; whose parents are delighted with the high quality of pastoral care and fantastic teaching their children receive. We need to learn from these schools – and from this report – through the work of the new attendance hubs.

Thankfully the picture isn’t all bleak. There are signs that the level of complexity is understood by some. The Attendance Action Alliance is a significant multi-agency body comprising key national leaders from education and social care sectors and allied services whose focus is on improving the life chances of young people. They need to find innovative ways of winning hearts and minds so that children’s learning and well-being resume priority and we don’t have a lost generation characterised by unfulfilled potential.

The organisers and members of the AAA would do well to read this report. If only as a reminder of the mountain they have to climb.

Sir Hamid Patel, CBE
CEO of Star Academies
September 2023



Introduction

Attendance in schools is in crisis, with profound consequences both for our education system and for society more widely. For decades, daily attendance at school – by every pupil, every day, throughout term time – has been part of the social contract between schools and families. This is no longer the case. The closure of schools during the pandemic, compounded by the subsequent shift in attitudes towards wellbeing and rising mental health problems in young people, as well as the cost-of-living crisis and enduring industrial action, all seem to have contributed to a gulf in expectations between families and the state.

Poor attendance at school has serious implications for children and young people. Lower attendance is correlated with lower attainment outcomes for pupils at both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4.¹ Data from the 2022–2023 academic year for the end of Key Stage 2 shows that 71% of pupils who had 99% attendance or above achieved expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared to only 50% of pupils with 90% attendance.² This drops to only 42% of children achieving the expected standards with 85% attendance, and the pattern continues; as attendance drops, so does attainment.³ Progress at Key Stage 4 is also correlated to attendance. Pupils who missed less than 1% of sessions across Year 10 and 11 had an average P8 score of +0.73, while those who missed 50% of sessions or more had an average score of –2.83.⁴ Moreover, the impact of lower attendance is larger for economically disadvantaged pupils.⁵ Regular school attendance is also associated with a wider set of social, health and civic benefits, and school-based interventions are shown to have a significant positive impact on pupils who are struggling; as such, school attendance underpins holistic wellbeing for young people.⁶

The crisis in attendance is increasingly highlighted in the media and is gaining political traction. There is a plethora of quantitative data on attendance, gathered by schools and published by the Department for Education on a weekly, termly and yearly basis that demonstrates the breadth and depth of the issue.⁷ We have used this data, set out in the context section below, to provide the context for our research. However, while this data paints a stark picture, it does not tell us anything about why attendance rates have plummeted following the pandemic.

This research seeks to understand the views of the parents and the lived experiences that lie beneath attendance statistics. It takes a qualitative approach, focus grouping parents from across the socioeconomic spectrum in order to understand their views on school attendance. It begins to examine some of the potential ways in which those working both within the education system and more broadly could increase school attendance. It is supplemented by immersive research with practitioners working for the charity School-Home Support and a small number of pupil focus groups, facilitated by the charity Khulisa.

In undertaking this research, we sought to give voice to parents across the socioeconomic spectrum. Their voices paint a bleak picture of the reality of the attendance crisis and shed light on the driving forces behind it. Although some of the parents we spoke to expressed disappointment at responses to attendance issues, the frustrations were not about individual schools and this report should not be read as such. Many specifically highlighted it was not about particular schools or teachers. For others, it was clear that their frustration with school was – at least in part – due to their inability to access any other support. It is clear from speaking to them that the social contract between schools and parents is profoundly broken and that it will take a colossal, multi-agency effort to rebuild it.

Attendance has always been a symptom rather than a cause, a manifestation of complex issues across the education system and beyond. This research covers many of these issues; from teacher retention and recruitment to healthcare provision, from mental health to poverty, parents have sought to highlight the interconnected nature of the challenges they experience.

As the cost of living continues to bite, sending thousands of families into a cycle of poverty, housing instability and poor mental and physical health, there are fears that we may not have reached the lowest ebb of school attendance.

School attendance looks set to worsen, with terrifying implications for young people and their families.

This report attempts to address the question of why attendance is in crisis by listening to families, parents and carers. It is this group who will ultimately decide what happens next with attendance. Without them, nothing is possible.

1 Department for Education (2022). *The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4*. Accessed: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4>

2 Thomson, D. (2023). *Absence and attainment in primary schools in 2023*. Education Datalab. Accessed: <https://ffteducation-datalab.org.uk/2023/09/absence-and-attainment-in-primary-schools-in-2023/>

3 Ibid..

4 Benyon, K. (2023). *The impact of absence on Progress 8*. Education Datalab. Accessed: <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2023/07/the-impact-of-absence-on-progress-8/>

5 Aucejo, E. M., and Romano, T. F. (2016). Assessing the effect of school days and absences on test score performance. *Economics of Education Review*, 55, 70-87; Gershenson, S., Jackowitz, A., and Brannegan, A. (2017). Are student absences worth the worry in US primary schools?. *Education Finance and Policy*, 12(2), 137-165.

6 Department for Education (2021). *Education, Schooling and Health Summary*. Accessed <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-schooling-and-health/education-schooling-and-health-summary>

7 Department for Education (2023). *Explore Education Statistics*. Accessed: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

Context

Since the pandemic, attendance in schools has plummeted. Overall absence rates remain stubbornly high at 7.5%, up from 4.7% in 2018-2019 (the year before the pandemic) and only down by a tenth of a percentage point from 7.6% in 2021-2022. 22.3% of pupils were 'persistently absent' from school in the 2022-2023 academic year, defined as when a pupil enrolment's overall absence equates to 10% or more of their possible sessions.⁸ The figure has barely changed since 2021-2022, when it sat at 22.5%, despite a supposed post-pandemic return to normality and increasing political interest in the issue.⁹ In comparison, in 2018-2019, the year before the pandemic, persistent absence rates were 10.9%.

The 'attendance gap' continues to widen, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds significantly more likely to be both absent and persistently absent than their peers. In 2022-2023, 37.9% of disadvantaged pupils were persistently absent. Disadvantaged pupils are more than twice as likely as their non-disadvantaged peers to be persistently absent, for whom persistent absence rates stood at 16.7% in 2022-2023. Moreover, whereas persistent absence rates among non-disadvantaged pupils have fallen by 0.8 percentage points (from 17.5% in 2021-2022), persistent absence from pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds has worsened by 0.5 percentage points from 37.2% in 2021-2022.

The attendance crisis is being felt more acutely in secondary than primary schools. Absence rates in primary schools were 6% in primary and 9.3% in secondary. Persistent absence rates in primary schools for 2022-2023 were 17.2%, in comparison to 28.3% in secondary schools. These figures were 8% and 13.7% respectively in 2018-2019. Persistent absence is highest in special schools, which have persistent absence rates of 38.7%, in comparison to 28.8% before the pandemic.

Finally, attendance varies by region, although attendance rates outside the capital are significantly lower than in London, which has the lowest rates of persistent absence. The attendance gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is significant in every region. The South East has the largest attendance gap between disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils at 6.3 percentage points, whereas London has a relatively smaller gap at 3.3 percentage points, although across all regions, attendance remains significantly lower than before the pandemic.



8 Department for Education (2023). *Pupil absence statistics: methodology*. Accessed: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england#section3-2>

9 Adams, E. (2023). 'More to be done' to bring down school absences, says education secretary'. *Guardian*. Accessed: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/aug/10/more-to-be-done-to-bring-down-school-absences-says-education-secretary>

Methodology

This research took a qualitative approach to understanding parents' views on school attendance. The core research was undertaken through a series of independently recruited focus groups with parents of school aged children. This data was supplemented by ethnographic-style immersive research in conjunction with one of the project's research partners, School-Home Support. Finally, a small number of questions regarding attendance were asked in pupil focus groups undertaken by a second research partner, Khulisa. All the research for this project was undertaken in June and July 2023.

Focus Groups:

Public First undertook eight independently recruited online focus groups with parents of school aged (5-19) children in eight different locations across England between the 27th of June and the 19th of July 2023.

The groups' compositions spanned the social spectrum using the Social Grade Classification System based on occupation, derived from the British National Readership Survey (NRS).¹⁰ The social grades, descriptors of who these apply to, and the percentage of the population included in each grade can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Social Grade Classification System:

Social Grade	Description	% of population (NRS Jan- Dec 2016)
A	Higher managerial, administrative and professional	4
B	Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional	23
C1	Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional	28
C2	Skilled manual workers	20
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	15
E	State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only	10

The eight focus groups spanned the six social groups and were undertaken in pairs to provide geographical comparisons and triangulation.

Table 2 – Focus group locations and social groups

Group	Social Group	Location
1	AB	Bristol
2	AB	Newcastle
3	C1/C2	Hartlepool
4	C1/C2	Long Eaton
5	D	Blackpool
6	D	Barnsley
7	E	London
8	E	Manchester

Each group had between four and eight participants. The groups were recruited to be representative of the ethnic diversity of their communities and to include both male and female participants.

All recruited participants had at least one school-aged child, although many had more than one. All groups included both primary and secondary parents and some parents had children in both. Some participants also had children in post-16 settings.

All participants who were recruited to the groups had a child with less than 100% attendance at school in the 2022-2023 academic year, although the reasons for their absence from school and the number of days children had been absent for varied significantly.

10 National Readership Survey (2023). Social Grade. Accessed: <https://nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>

In addition to the eight focus groups described above, Public First undertook an additional focus group in collaboration with School-Home Support. Here, parents and carers were recruited directly because of their involvement with School-Home Support. This group was therefore made up of participants whose children were experiencing significant attendance issues at the time. This group were all female, and all lived in East London.

Shadowing:

Public First researchers spent a day shadowing two different School-Home Support practitioners in two London settings. These were:

- An Alternative Provision (AP) Unit in East London which provides education and support for students aged 11 to 16 who are struggling to attend mainstream school due to underlying emotional and mental health issues, and;
- A primary school in a severely deprived area of East London.

The shadowing included: a tour of the campus, observing morning routines, social times (e.g. break and lunch) and lessons. Researchers were given the opportunity for 1-1 and small group conversations with pupils and staff, observing day-to-day interactions between both parents and staff, and pupils and staff.

Throughout the process, the researchers made detailed fieldwork notes and captured individual reflections.

Pupil Focus Groups:

As part of their wider programme of pupil voice and research, Khulisa undertook two focus groups with secondary pupils in years 7-10. As part of these groups, they asked a series of questions to better understand pupil's views of school and attendance. The data generated from these groups has informed the wider context of this research.

Confidentiality:

Throughout this research, the identifying features of all participants has been blurred to protect their anonymity. This report uses thick description to describe and interpret what has been observed and discussed within a broader context and provide analysis based upon the voices of our participants.¹¹ Their words remain unchanged.

Partners:

This report and the primary research underpinning it was funded and supported by three organisations: **Impetus**, a charity that transforms the lives of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds by ensuring they get the right support to succeed in school, in work and in life; **Khulisa**, a charity that helps young people who are vulnerable to school and social exclusion develop the social and emotional skills they need to thrive; and **School-Home Support**, an education charity that looks beyond the classroom to tackle the underlying causes of school absence, supporting the whole family to overcome barriers to learning and build resilience for the future.



This report has been authored by Dr Sally Burtonshaw, Associate Director and Ed Dorrell, Partner at Public First.

11 Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief Note on the Origins, Evolution, and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept Thick Description. *The Qualitative Report*, 11(3), 538-549.

Headline Findings

- 1 Covid has caused a seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance that is going to take a monumental, multi-service effort to change.
- 2 It is no longer the case that every day matters – at least from the perspective of parents.
- 3 There has been a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum.
- 4 Attendance currently has an Other People's Children (OPC) challenge.
- 5 The mental health crisis in young people is a huge, compounding issue around attendance.
- 6 Term-time holidays are now entirely socially acceptable across all socioeconomic groups.
- 7 The cost-of-living crisis is driving more families into poverty, and this is an underlying driver of poor attendance in families from lower and no-income groups.
- 8 Despite popular political and media perception, the increase in parents working from home is not driving the attendance crisis.
- 9 School level attendance systems feel increasingly draconian to families, and yet they are not sufficiently robust or accurate. This undermines the relationship between school and families.
- 10 Sanctions are seen as both irrelevant and antagonistic across all parent groups.





FINDING 1:
Covid has caused a seismic shift in parental attitudes to school attendance that is going to take a monumental, multi service effort to change

There was consensus across the socioeconomic spectrum that Covid-19 had fundamentally altered the relationships between families and school. Lockdowns, while essential during the pandemic for controlling the spread of Covid-19 and saving lives, have left an enduring legacy.

There has been a paradigm shift in the view of parents. Pre Covid, ensuring your child's daily attendance at school was seen as a fundamental element of good parenting. Post Covid, parents no longer felt that to be the case, and instead view attending school as one of several – often competing – options or demands on their child on a daily basis, against a backdrop of a more holistic approach to daily life.

Many of these trade-offs are discussed subsequently in this report including mental health and wellbeing, holidays and wider 'family time', physical health and logistical demands.

A 'Pandora's Box' has been opened and it will be incredibly difficult to close it again.

Parents spoke of the way in which Covid-19 lockdowns had resulted in them feeling comfortable with structuring time at home with their children, and that school was one method of educating their children, rather than the only one. Parents simply didn't believe you could close schools for months and then go back to insisting that every day of school was essential.

'I think since Covid, having a child at home has got easier. So, during Covid, when you had your children at home, you weren't used to having your child at home every day of the week – [before] they were at school five days a week. During Covid, you had your child at home every single day. So whereas it used to be 'no, you go school, it's a school day', now I think when they're [the child] saying 'can we have a day off', they [the parent] know that having a child isn't really all that bad during the day at home. I think it's just become easier for a parent to have a child at home because they're used to it.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, child aged 14 and 17 months.

'Pre Covid, I was very much about getting the kids into school, you know, attendance was a big thing. Education was a major thing. After Covid, I'm not gonna lie to you, my take on attendance and absence now is like I don't really care anymore. Life's too short. I want them to be educated and I want them to go far in life. But if we're not getting our help and support from the government and the schooling system, then I'm sorry, I used to back it [school], but post Covid, I don't now.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'We don't have to send in our kids every single day. Covid has taught us not to take it anymore.'

Male, Bristol, social group B, children aged 16, 21 and 23.

'I know that they've had two years with Covid where they had ages off school. So two weeks out in a year is not going to make a massive difference to the fact that the damage has been done. When they've had so long off anyway, it's a bit hypocritical.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.

'I think through Covid people have realised – I thought I had to send my children to school, I didn't realise I had an option ever, even from primary school I didn't realise I opted into the school service. I just applied for a place because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. I didn't realise that I didn't have to do any of that!'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 9 and 11.

'I ultimately don't buy into every day matters... They will catch up.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, child aged 15.

Some of the ways in which schools had delivered learning during lockdowns compounded parents' perceptions of the importance of a school day. Parents spoke about the impact of the pandemic on their children both academically and in terms of their broader development. From an academic perspective, parents were frustrated with what they frequently saw as the poor quality of 'Covid catch-up' and a feeling that there was a lack of urgency or commitment from schools in supporting their children. Several more affluent parents (social groups A and B) spoke about using external tutors to support their child to plug these gaps.

'Over Covid, they sent home an hour and a half of learning every day. So that's clearly what they're being taught every day. One and a half hours. It's not going to kill anybody.'

Female, Bristol social group B, children aged 11 and 4.

'My little girl is doing some extra tutoring with a Maths teacher... because I was a little bit concerned about what I felt she knew [after Covid]. She feels like she actually missed quite a chunk of Maths. But I do think how many more kids have been left behind? [than are accessing private tutoring]. There will be a lot of people who aren't in the position that we want to do tutoring. What do they do?'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.

Parents raised the use of technology for pupils who are not able to physically attend school for some reason, but who could nevertheless access the curriculum. There was frustration among parents that this technology had been mobilised and advanced during the pandemic, but was not being used to support children now.

'They've sort of lost sight of how some of those technologies and processes put in place could still benefit in this element [attendance].'

Male, Newcastle, social group B, child aged 14.



FINDING 2:

It is no longer the case that every day matters - at least from the perspective of parents

Parents across the socioeconomic spectrum shared the feeling that each individual school day was not valuable. It is no exaggeration to say that there has been a complete change in the way parents understand their relationship with mandatory full-time education. This appeared to be particularly acute for younger pupils and those who are not taking external exams (SATs, GCSEs and A Levels). This sentiment was expressed slightly differently, but was consistent across the different social groups.

Parents agreed that every school day could not possibly be that important, given that so much time had been lost to lockdowns and strikes. Moreover, there was a sense from parents that other elements of their lives were just as, important as attending school, if not more so.

All subsequent findings should be seen through this crucial lens.

Parents were broadly sympathetic for the industrial action over the past year. However, the strike days were also held up as being inconsistent with an 'every day matters' narrative.

'I see it as a kick in the face really. They can sit down and scrutinise us when our kids are genuinely ill, but then they can choose and say, "right we're stopping these days on strike".'

Male, Manchester, social group E, children aged 14 and 15.

'There's been no chart of attendance during the strikes from the teachers. You know, our kids are missing out on their education, but that's never mentioned. When there's several days of strike action, we don't send the school an attendance report. And it sounds a bit petty, but really, they're [children] missing out on their schooling. And that's never mentioned or considered.'

Male, Newcastle, social group A, children aged 8 and 9.

'I think particularly this year, with all the teacher strikes, Parents have been more lax and think, "well, the teachers aren't in, so if I want to take my kid out for a couple of days, I'll do it because they've done it." I know a lot of my friends took their children out this last week and thought, "I'm not bothered no more".'

Female, Long Eaton, social group C, children aged 13 and 17.

The lack of value was felt to be particularly acute at the end of term, and there was a prevalent perception that children were going into school to do solely 'fun' activities such as sports days, trips, and productions. While parents were not necessarily unhappy that these activities were being delivered by schools, they did feel that this meant that these days were unimportant, and absence on these days was entirely acceptable.

'I know in the last two weeks, my kids have done nothing in school because it's the wind-down to the school holidays. And my friend who is a teacher said they'll not be doing anything in school anyway.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.

'At the end of term, they might spend two days watching a film. My kids could do that at home. So if I wanted to take them out two days earlier and I can't, at end of term, they'll be watching a film. Sometimes I ask them what they've done that day; 'guided reading', and it's just them sat there with a book for an hour. And he's just got to read the book that he brings home with him every night, for the first hour of the morning. Well he can do that at home really. Don't get me wrong, I think education is important... but I don't think every day is essential.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5, 6 and 11.

Parents were bemused by the idea that there would be any concern around attendance if their child was considered to be on track academically.

'I got my son's-end of-year report, and basically, he was excelling in every in every subject. And then when I looked at the last page, it was his attendance. And it said that his attendance was a cause for concern. But he'd had Covid, we'd been on holiday, and there was a few other things that he'd been poorly with. And I just thought well, I'm not- I'm not concerned about his attendance, because he was excelling in all subjects, so clearly he is fine. Had it been anything different than that, I'd probably think he really should be in school a bit more. But again, he's not off very much.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10

'They do come up with the statistics, don't they, you know, if you miss one week of school, it's the equivalent of dropping a grade at a GCSE or something like that. And I just think, because we've all been lied to so much, that we are becoming a bit more militant. And I just think they are our children at the end of the day and it's our life, and we can do what we want. I think, you know, good for us.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, child aged 15

Any level of absence that didn't trigger a sanction was considered entirely acceptable by these parents, with a sense that it was only after sanctions that there was any problem with being absent from school. Absence before that was essentially, permitted.

'They're allowed, I think, before they hit an alert, a certain percentage of their days off.'

Male, Newcastle, social group A, children aged 8 and 9

A small number of parents in different groups cited the large number of supply teachers and linked it to a downgrading of the importance of 100% attendance. If schools couldn't guarantee full-time teachers, and the continuity of education that that represented, then parents should not be compelled to uphold their side of the bargain.

'The teachers have got more stress, and the teachers are getting younger. I've seen two teachers, that were two years below me at high school. You know, these are like kids teaching kids, if you will. And that's why the teachers nowadays can't support and, nurture our children the way we'd like them to be, because there aren't older teachers anymore. These are all young kids teaching kids.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 14 years and 17 months

'You look at my daughter's school and she doesn't have consistency of teachers. They have lots of supply teachers. They're not actually learning anything, because the supply teacher doesn't teach that subject. So you know that she's going to school and she's not being taught properly. Then it makes me think, "sod them" kind of thing. That's the kind of mentality you have, well I have anyhow!'

Female, Long Eaton, social group C, children aged 13 and 17



FINDING 3:

There has been a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between the school system and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Parents spoke openly about the breakdown of relationships between schools and families, although this manifests differently across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Amongst poorer parents (social groups D and E), this was discussed in terms of a lack of care for pupils and families and a mistrust of school. Amongst more affluent parents (social groups A, B and C) this manifest mostly in an ambivalence to school and an underlying resentment regarding an intrusion which ran contrary to parents' expectations around family life.

Parents from poorer families expressed a fundamental mistrust of schools. They do not think that schools and teachers have the best interests of their children at heart. Many of them identified their children as having varying challenges which would impact on their schooling, such as SEN, being bullied, or being long-term sick. They did not feel supported by schools in tackling or improving these issues.

They repeatedly expressed strong feelings of schools 'brushing the issue under the carpet' in search of better Ofsted verdicts or just a quiet life.

'They tend to push it under the carpet. You know, all the high schools near me seem to be more interested in in their Ofsted reports and whether they are doing well on them, rather than what's actually going on there.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'I think there's lack of support. It's like it's gone from being caring and supportive to nobody gives a shit lately. I just feel like there's no support for the children, for the parents or anything. I feel like [they're saying] just get on with it. That's how I feel anyhow.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 12 and 10.

There was a strong degree of empathy towards teachers and schools, but some maintained that they did not believe the education system was serving their children.

'I think the teachers just have no time, there isn't enough time in a day. With my son, it's like, they don't even have the time to talk to him, to actually listen to what he's got to say, to find out about the issue or the reason behind some behaviour. I don't want to put blame on them solely, because I understand that the teachers aren't just teaching what they taught when I was at school, you know, they are doing a lot of parenting as well.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 11 and 9.

'I think the teachers are over stretched now with more kids - the class sizes have doubled. The teachers have got more stressed. But you've also got to be able to support that child the way that they need support. I get that every child is different, so it's sometimes a harder job for them.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 14 and 17 months.

Many parents, particularly those from poorer social groups, were clearly struggling to navigate both school systems and broader systems, such as mental health services. They were not unaware of the fact that they and their children needed help, but they experienced a feeling of deep frustration and occasional helplessness at their inability to access it.

'I've questioned the school for some help and everything else for my daughter. And I just seem to be banging my head against a brick wall. We've been referred to CAMHS three times and discharged three times, but she's clearly got a lot of things going on.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 12 and 10.

There was a fear that schools no longer 'cared' for pupils and families, and the sense of growing 'datafication'.

'It's run like a business now, it's not really ran as much as an education provider anymore. What they're interested in is how many of the kids do well on their SATs, or how well they're performing, because then they can draw down more funding.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, children aged 10 and 14.

'It's not even the kid's challenges, it's the parent's challenges. I mean, they expect the kids to be there 24/7 and then give you a report of how many times they haven't been in, even though that's just the way life has gone and they'll have to deal with that.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 15, 12 and 15.

There was an acknowledgement that the challenges parents, carers, siblings and other family members faces impacts upon pupil attendance. However, there was a feeling that schools could work to be more understanding of family challenges such as parental mental health, family illness, bereavement, and medical appointments.

'The school that should really support you as much as the school is also for our children. They're also there to serve you.'

Female, London, social group E, child aged 15.

'I've got epilepsy, so obviously, I have a lot of hospital appointments. If I can't pick up my boy, I have to take my letters from the hospital to the school to prove that I've got an appointment. So I might say I have to pick him up at one, because I can't get back for the school run. But I have to take them into prove it. And then they put him down as absent, not that it's medical or anything authorised.'

Female, London, social group E, child aged 8.

'I think a lot of it comes down to treating us [parents] like human beings. Because at the minute, I don't know if anybody else feels that you don't always feel like a parent, you're just somebody who's just been allowed to look after this child, you have to do everything that the establishment tells you, you have to do with their child. Our free will has been taken away. I think that's probably the way to put it.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, child aged 14.

More affluent parents also expressed a disenchantment with school, although they felt more disengaged than angry. In contrast to poorer families, they didn't believe that a stronger, more personal relationship with schools or teachers would make any difference to attendance. Parents believed that schools should be flexing to new social norms and attitudes, rather than the other way round.

'You can't live your life around what the school wants, and what the local authority wants, because their expectations are a bit unrealistic.'

Male, Newcastle, social group B, child aged 14.

'Let the parents parent.'

Male, Newcastle, social group B, child aged 14.

Parents who had children with additional needs reported a much stronger sense of disengagement with school across the social spectrum. It appeared that there was no additional bandwidth for handling anything outside of the norm.

'Our little boy has special needs. He's got autism and he has what can only be described as very challenging behaviour. He is on his second primary school - the first primary school just sent him home every day. So he's now in a school that is well-known and highly praised for being a special needs-friendly school, and it's unclear as to how long it's going to last before he has to go to a special school. I'd say on the whole, we're probably happier than we were. But we still don't necessarily feel that is in the right setting.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 7.

'My two eldest children have got autism. And the school they go to just doesn't deal with it very well at all.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 15, 12 and 5.

'I think now we've found he's got ADHD and some autistic traits, they've [the school] been really good, but I have been, like, on it with them. I think that's what you have to be; you have to be loud, and make a lot of noise to make sure that things are in place for them, which isn't necessarily the way it should be.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, children aged 5 and 11.

'I think we should get teachers that are more trained, you know, for kids that have anxiety and everything. My daughter's got autism, but there's only one teacher that's worked in another school with kids with special needs. So she's got, like, seven different teachers, but only one of them is trained in it. So all these other teachers haven't got a clue on how to deal with her.'

Male, Manchester, social group D, children aged 19, 18, 13, 5 and 2.

'There's a lack of funding for the schools to support each individual child with SEN. The funding has just gone.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.



FINDING 4:

Attendance currently has an 'Other People's Children' challenge

While almost all parents were unsurprised that attendance rates had dropped since the pandemic, they did not think there was any problem with their own children's absence rates. We term this an Other People's Children (OPC) challenge. This was driven by two key beliefs:

1. Their children's attendance was very good (regardless of whether this would be officially seen in that way) and they 'didn't keep their kids off' to an unreasonable extent.
2. When their children did miss school, it was for a very good reason.

Therefore, any problems with the rate of absence and the reasons for absence were driven by 'other people's children', and were not their responsibility.

Many parents began by saying they 'didn't keep their kids off' school. Lots gave examples of where they had sent their children to school when perhaps other parents would have kept them at home.

There was a general view that high attendance was important, but only for other people's children. All parents considered themselves good parents who could look after their own children and make decisions about what was important in their lives. This was particularly true of parents whose children were doing well at school.

'I would only not send them if they're if they've physically been sick, anything else, then they go to school.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 10 and 8.

'My daughter's always in. Always in. Whenever she can go in, she does. I'm not one of those parents that keeps her off with a sniffle.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 11 and 9.

'I think there's a difference between people taking their kids out for a two week holiday once a year, and keeping them off when they're really poorly, to people who don't send their kids to school on a regular basis for not really any reason.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.

'When it comes to attendance, I make sure they've got enough attendance. But I also look after my kids.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 15, 12 and 5.

'Sometimes he gets ear infections and so he's off but as soon as he's well, he's back in. We're not like some parents who I know are keeping them off all the time.'

Male, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 5.

'I'm looking around and thinking, "I know you've had loads of time off though".'

Female, London, social group E, child aged 5.

'You've got the parents that we've got here [in the group] doing all we can, and we've got the parents that- 'we've got enough money, we just take them out of school, we're going to take them on a six-week holiday into Spain' and stuff like that. And they're doing that twice a year, and they really are taking the mickey out of the system, then, yes, of course, they should be sanctioned for it. But to me, it isn't right - everyone's got different situations.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 15, 12 and 5.



FINDING 5: The mental health crisis in young people is a huge, compounding issue around attendance

Parents, particularly those of secondary children, talked about the big rise in anxiety they saw both in their own children and in their peers. Parents had significant concerns around mental health issues, but also about wider wellbeing. This was reflected in additional 'mental health days' where children were too tired, stressed or anxious to attend school. These days of absence were not necessarily (although sometimes) accompanied by diagnosis of mental health problems, but were commonly associated with a broader sense of protecting and supporting their children. This was seen most acutely in lower social groups.

Parents felt that the state had a wider role to play, and that a crisis in CAMHS was creating a devastating ripple effect on education. Parents in social group D and E in particular spoke very personally of the challenges their children were facing, including their difficulties in navigating the system. They pinned the blame squarely on schools, but this could well be a reflection of schools as the only service that they could (almost) always access.

Parents talked at length about their concerns about their children's mental health and how this impacted upon their attendance. They often blamed schools for not doing enough to support their children.

'My son's mental health went bad. So now he's having therapy. They do some therapy in school and things like that. It's not enough.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'My eldest - she was playing football, she was well into her sport, confident, outgoing, and then we were put on lockdown. Now she gets herself worked up about situations. And then obviously, because she gets herself worked up, then she's getting headaches, stomach aches, she feels sick. So she misses school due to it now.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5, 6 and 11.

'A lot of schools, with kids with anxiety, they've got to have a lot more compassion and understanding.'

Male, Manchester, social group E, children aged 14 and 15.

Sometimes parents acknowledged that the problems were wider than schools; issues with CAMHS came up frequently, both with the slowness of diagnosis and then the lack of support.

'Attendance and absence have gone through the roof, and I can't see what the government are doing about it. They're not really doing - they've left the schools and head teachers to deal with it, and then you get parents that are really angry and then obviously, they back off because don't want to - so we're fighting for our kids.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'Why are we scrimping on educating the next generation?'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 11 and 9.

The intersection of SEND and mental health challenges came up frequently. Across the social spectrum, parents felt like any child who needed additional support for whatever reason were not having their needs met, and that this was significantly impacting upon their attendance.

'She's got autism. She's got [mental health] problems. And she's had loads of time off because the school just will not deal with it.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 15, 12 and 5.

'I was talking to another kid's mums in the playground the other day, and she was saying that her son's autistic, and when they have something that's really overwhelming, he has to have time off after that to decompress because he just can't cope. She was telling me that she'd had a meeting at the school about his attendance, and they just don't understand what to do about it, how to manage his anxiety.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.



FINDING 6: Term-time holidays are now entirely socially acceptable across all socioeconomic groups

There has been a radical shift in the way term time holidays are viewed, and the scale at which they are being taken.

The taking of term-time holidays was almost universal. A huge proportion of parents across all social groups talked openly about taking their children on holiday during termtime, and those that did not were very sympathetic to it, with several suggesting that they would do the same if the circumstances were right for them.

Many parents argued that the cost differential made the option impossible to ignore. This was universal across social groups, with discussions around term-time holidays ranging from allowing all parents to access holidays they would not otherwise be able to afford, to cheaper skiing trips, to long weekends in caravan parks and daytrips. Some parents were clear that this was a new post-Covid phenomenon, and certainly not something that would have been acceptable in previous generations.

'You see a lot more people doing this, taking the children out during school time and everything, but then you can't blame people because the cost in for holidays is a lot lower during term times that it is during normal holidays. So it's a difficult one.'

Male, Burnley, social group D, child aged 9.

'You sometimes just think, it's a £60 fine if you take your child away for a week out of school. So then if you look at a holiday during term time, say it's £1000, you're gonna get a £60 fine. If you've got two children so it's £1120. Then if you look at the same holiday, during school holiday time, you're looking at £3000. Now some people are starting to think that this is a no-brainer, I'll take the fine.'

Female, Burnley, social group D, child aged 14 and 17 months.

'Holidays are so expensive going during school holidays, for some people it's the difference between having or not having a holiday. And for me I'll definitely be taking them out if it's for a purpose. We always took them skiing and we always did it in February half term to try and comply. Now I look back and I think why on earth did I do that? Why didn't I just take them out for a cheap week in January? I would almost say skiing is quite... it's almost an educational holiday.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, child aged 15.

'What's £60 [fine] compared to paying the extra [for a school holiday trip]?'

Male, Manchester, social group E, children aged 14 and 15.

'Covid has affected it. My view is, well, they were happy for my child not to be in school for six months. So therefore, if I want to take them out for a holiday, I'm going to. It also makes you realise that actually, there is more to life.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, child aged 15.

'I haven't, but I probably would, just because the price doubles in school holidays to what you pay in term time, and I'd rather pay the fine and save an extra two grand on a holiday.'

Female, Barnsley, social group D, child aged 7.

Parents from poorer social groups (D and E) highlighted what they saw as a tension between the rhetoric of families needing to spend time together and the lack of support for them doing so.

'You know, people are constantly complaining that home life isn't that great for children and there's no family time and everyone's so busy. People are willing to spend time as a family on a holiday - I don't understand why anyone would be opposed to it or make it harder for people.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 11 and 9.

'They don't like you going, do they? But to me, it's pricing. I've been fined a couple of times for taking them out of school, but I'd rather pay the £60 fine and have it £600 cheaper, than going in the school holidays. And then my point with the whole teacher training days and things like that is, it's alright for you guys to do it. So I think why not?'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'I'd rather pay the fine that the local authority or the school will give me than pay an extra grand or two grand to take my children on holiday. I sent a letter last time to the headmistress of the children's school, just saying I'm making them aware. They're gonna get more learning than they will in school. It's memories that they're creating with the families and experiences that they're not going to get every day. But it's purely the cost. If the cost was the same in the holidays, then it wouldn't affect it. We're not all rich.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5, 6 and 11.

'I am a single parent, and you obviously want to do nice things for your kids. There's no way that I can afford to take my child out during school holidays, there isn't - I do not have the funds for that. And I know that kids should be in school, and I understand that. But I feel like kids do need treats and things like that... so a couple of days down a caravan away, I will take her because I genuinely can't afford it during school holiday times. It's way too expensive.'

Female, London, social group E, child aged 5.

Parents were keen to stress that they minimised the time off for holidays by taking only part of a week (or two) off from school and bridging the end of term, still enabling them to secure cheaper flights and accommodation. They articulated this as being proactive in ensuring their child missed less school in order to go on holiday.

'So when I take them off school, I'll try and book a holiday where it's half term, and then about four days before. So they weren't missing a massive chunk'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 5.

Younger children and those who weren't in school years that parents designated as 'key' were seen as being particularly permissible to take out of school.

'I think actually, they're quite young, and they're not in a key school year...going abroad and going holiday is actually quite good experience for them. Really, they learn a lot by doing it.'

Male, Newcastle, social group A, children aged 8 and 9.

'I take them out of school for a holiday, because I don't feel like they're actually learning anything more at school. But if they were like doing their GCSEs, or their mock exams, I wouldn't.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 10 and 8.

'With the strikes and the Covid, unless you do it during exam times, I don't think people think it's that much of a big deal. I think pre-Covid, you just stayed within the time of the school and summer holidays. I think even I was like, it's a no-no, but now, post Covid I think kids kind of get back and can catch up. And, with the strikes and stuff, I thought, what [is] one or two or three days to catch up?'

Female, Bristol, social group B, children aged 13 and 9.



FINDING 7:

The cost-of-living crisis is driving more families into poverty and this is an underlying driver of poor attendance in families from lower / no income groups

The cost-of-living crisis was touched on by many parents, across all social groups.

For those in poorer social groups, particularly in D and E, poverty underpinned much of the discussion. Wealthier parents spoke less about the direct impact of the cost-of-living crisis on them and their families, but there was widespread awareness that this was causing increasing problems for those families who were already struggling financially. Parents were deeply empathetic towards families who might be struggling with attendance issues as a result.

Although not all parents spoke significant attendance issues personally, there was deep empathy towards families who did.

'We're literally in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. What if you've got a family that are on a really low income, the kids have worn all of their school uniforms, but they can't afford to buy washing powder, to wash the uniforms to get them clean and smelling nice and going to school? So they keep them off instead. The school could be helping with stuff like that if they actually understood it, rather than getting the local authority to descend on those struggling saying you're going to get fined, which is only then going to add additional pressure those who are on a really low income.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, children aged 10 and 14.

For those from poorer social groups, it was clear that the cost-of-living crisis was permeating decision making at every level.

'Times are harder at the moment, you know, lots of us are doing things we'd rather not, making decisions about what we have and what we don't.'

Male, Barnsley, social group D, children aged 4 and 8.

Transport was raised as a significant issue in getting children to school – the simple act of 'getting to school' was too expensive.

'Kids from round here watch their parents struggle and instead of going to school, go elsewhere and do other jobs to bring in some money, even if it's a risk [getting fined] to them and their family.'

Male, Barnsley, social group D, children aged 10 and 14.

'I think the cost of living has probably not helped, because parents have maybe got to drop multiple children off at different schools. And if you know, it's hard, isn't it. If they're refusing to go to school, but you managed to get them out of the house, and then you want to take him in a taxi, that's an extra cost as well. And everything, everything just adds up at the minute.'

Female, SHS Parent, child aged 11.

'The cost of living is not nice at all. It is a struggle to get the kids to school, especially when you're a lone parent, you've got to do by yourself, you've got to find that money just to get them into school. I live about 30 minutes away from her school. So to get her on that bus it is expensive. You would have to talk about £10, £20 or £30 a month, which sometimes I don't have. Universal Credit, they sometimes pay you monthly. If you don't have it, you sometimes have to take out a loan and then when the loan comes, it's lovely but then when you have to pay it back out of your own money. It's a nightmare.'

Female, SHS Parent, child aged 8.

'You can't get your kids to school because no one's helping you. You're that far away and then the teachers are still getting on your back because you're not getting the kids into school. It's ridiculous, no matter how much you ask for help, because no one will help you.'

Female, SHS Parent, children aged 21, 15, 9 and 6.

More broadly, parents who were struggling to pay for basic amenities highlighted the implications such difficulties posed to their efforts to provide essential care for their children.

'Food, gas, electric: definitely there's been a lot of cutbacks, a lot of cutbacks. I honestly don't know where to go from here, because I just feel like it's getting worse.'

Female, SHS Parent, children aged 2, 5, 7 and 11.

This was an area where parents felt more could be done, from providing better transport solutions to feeding children higher quality food in larger quantities, or offering direct financial support to families.



FINDING 8:

Despite popular political and media opinion, the increase in parents working from home is not driving the attendance crisis

Politicians and the media have made much of the impact of increasing numbers of parents working from home more regularly post-Covid, and the potential negative impact of this on attendance.

This hypothesis has not been borne out in our research – parents emphatically did not feel that working from home allowed them to facilitate having their children off school.

Some parents, particularly those from wealthier social groups, said they did work from home more post-Covid, but all agreed that this would not make them more likely to have their children off school.

'I still send them to school as much as I possibly can. We've in a smallish house and my desk is set up in the in the living room, so the last thing I want, especially because I work in the department I work in – I work in the HR team – so a lot of what we talk about is sensitive and confidential. I don't want somebody who's trying to tell me something to be put off by the fact that my 14-year-old son has just walked past in the periphery to the shot.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, children aged 10 and 14.

'I don't know anyone who wants to have the kids at home whilst you're working. It's like, well you can't really do it if I'm honest and mine are pretty good.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.

'I work from home now. I'm in meetings all the time and I can't be disturbed while I'm at home, on the phone to customers and residents all the time about sensitive situations. So yeah, off to school as much as possible.'

Male, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 10.

Some parents in social group E had heard about the idea of parents working from home and keeping their children off school from the media. None of these parents were in work, and therefore didn't experience this themselves. They were angry at the idea of people doing so.

'It feels a bit bloody cheeky to me. I wanna say to them 'go and get a proper job'. Not that I know anyone who's done it. None of my friends work from home at all.'

Female, London, social group E, child aged 5.



FINDING 9: School level attendance systems feel increasingly draconian to families and yet they are not sufficiently robust or accurate, which undermines the relationship between school and families

There was widespread concern from parents across all social groups that communication from schools around attendance was excessive, confusing and not always accurate. Parents wanted a different form of communication from schools, and above all, for it to be accurate. The lack of faith in school level systems undermined school-parent relationships, as parents did not trust that their child's attendance was being tracked accurately.

Inaccuracies in attendance data also have significant implications for data collection across the wider system. If individual and school-level data is not correct, this will distort the national picture and undermine the policy solutions based upon it. Some parents were frustrated about school policies around absence, particularly sickness and how it impacted on their child's attendance.

There was concern that communication from schools around attendance was excessive and not always accurate, which had led to increased anxiety from parents.

'[Child] was going on a school trip. I got a text message at about 10:20 to say he wasn't at school, and could fill I in a box to explain why he wasn't at school and why I hadn't called in. So then I had to phone school to try and find out where he was if he wasn't in school, because obviously, that created quite a bit of anxiety in me. They then called back to say he wasn't at school [he was on a trip], and it was only thankfully because the headmaster walked past and said, who whose parents are you ringing, and he said, 'oh, he's on the school trip today'. But I had 25 minutes of thinking my 14-year-old boy had either not got on the school bus and not come home, and God knows where he might have been.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, children aged 10 and 14.

'We've had phone calls like hallway through the day, 'your child's absent from school.' No, she's not, I've brought her in. 'Alright, okay. Nobody told us.' That's halfway through the day. So they don't talk. And they're really hard to work with a lot of the time.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 15, 12 and 5.

'My daughter has diabetes, and she has regular hospital checkups, so we take her out to those. The frustrating thing is, you know, even if it's for hospital, it's medical, even if we let the school know advance, a few months later, we'll get a note saying she's absent and it's unexplained. You have to go through it, you have to document everything we find.'

Male, London, social group E, children aged 11, 8 and 6.

Some parents were frustrated about school policies around absence, particularly sickness and how it impacted on their child's attendance.

'We were going through a phase of if he felt sick, they were sending him home. And then if he vomited at school, we weren't allowed to take him back into the school for 48 hours in case he was contagious. He has a medical condition that causes vomiting - they know this. And then we got a letter off the council about his attendance, and it was purely down to the school sending him home every time he felt sick and then saying you can't bring him back for two days.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 7.

'I did have a situation a couple of months ago where the school rang me to say that my little girl wasn't very well, and would I go and pick her up. And as I was picking her up, she was playing outside in the school yard with no coat on. And I was- I was a bit mad, because I was thinking, no wonder she said she's not very well, she'll be freezing. So [I spoke to her and] I said, What's the matter with you? And she said, I just don't feel very well. And I was like, did you have your dinner? Yes. Did you eat it all? Yes, I was like, right, well, then you can stay. And I felt really bad. But I said to the teacher, you know, she's fine.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.



FINDING 10: Sanctions are seen as both irrelevant and antagonistic across all parent groups

Parents were uniformly unsupportive of sanctions, which were seen as both irrelevant to the discussion on attendance, and actively antagonistic.

There was absolutely no shame in 'playing the game' in order to avoid fines, e.g. by misleading school about children being ill when they were actually on holiday.

Suggestions around incentives were often met by a level of gentle mocking, on the basis that since parents already sent their children to school when they felt it was appropriate to do so, incentives were not going to change that.

The concept of 'authorised' and 'unauthorised' absences was very contentious among some parents, who took issue with what they saw as policing of their parenting. Parents agreed that this did not make any difference to whether their child was in school.

'I mean it hasn't changed what we do. Whatever the form says we're going to do it anyway to be honest, whether it will be unauthorised or authorised.'

Male, Newcastle, social group A, children aged 8 and 9.

'In whose eyes is it authorised and unauthorised? Who is making the decisions here?'

Male, Newcastle, social group A, children aged 8 and 9.

'It doesn't matter if they authorise it or don't authorise it. I'm doing what I'm doing.'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 8 and 10.

'I think it gets my back up a little bit. I think unauthorised?! They're my children, I'll do what I want with them! I'll take them out of school forever if I want to!'

Female, Newcastle, social group B, children aged 6 and 8.

Neither attendance incentives nor punishments looked like they would change parental attitudes. At no stage did parents consider that such strategies might make any difference to their attitude. They were uninterested in texts and letters home too.

'I can be green, amber or red [ranking on attendance], call if what you want, I'm not going to change it!'

Male, Newcastle, social group A, children aged 8 and 9.

'I think it's really disheartening for the children who are genuinely ill and need to be off, rewarding the other children when there's a bouncy castle outside or a trip to the park when they're not allowed to do that. For no fault of their own.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'I think if it [attendance] drops below 95% or something, you get a letter. And you just think, that's nice. And then if it happens again and it drops further, then you get invited in for an attendance meeting, and you know exactly what they're going to say to you in that meeting, you just kind of have to conform and just go along with it.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, children aged 11 and 4.

'I think sometimes they praise the wrong children [with incentives], they praise them for not going to school all that much.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, child aged 14.

'No, because if they're not going to school, then there's an obvious reason why my children are not going to school. Because they're poorly or under the weather or we've got things planned. So if you sent me a text message, it wouldn't, it wouldn't make a difference to be honest.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5, 6 and 11.

'With the text messages, you're gonna think if you're gonna annoy me, I'm gonna annoy you. My kids are gonna get there whatever time you get there.'

Male, Manchester, social group E, children aged 14 and 15.

'I'm not being funny, if anyone turned up at my door, they're not coming invading around my property. I don't agree with that. At the end of the day, I'm their parent and legal guardian. If they can't do it over a phone call or an email, then... I wouldn't have them round at my door.'

Male, Manchester, social group E, children aged 14 and 15.

'With a text message you can just ignore it can't you.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

'Some of these children are off with anxiety, mental health or whatever the illness is or whatnot. Sending someone round to some of these parents' houses, they're probably looking to get themselves knocked out, and that's the nicest way of putting it. You're into people's houses, especially into an area like Salford where parents are struggling, you know, we are struggling, we're trying to get our kids into school... I think it's better to get the parents into school. Why don't you ask the parent what they want rather than going knocking on their doors?'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 4 and 10.

'I think doing it in the home is dead intrusive. I think doing it at school - I like having face to face meetings. I hate emails, because they just can't get your point across. So I don't like emails, text messages. I do like face to face with the teachers. I feel like if they're coming into your home then it is quite intrusive. I think it's best to do it at school. It's a school matter for the attendance. I think it should be done at school.'

Female, Manchester, social group E, children aged 5 and 10.

Parents did not think fines were effective, either for themselves or for the deterrence of others.

'There's got to be basic rules, but there's always those parents who can afford to just take the kids out anyway, whenever they want to take them on holiday, and they probably don't even worry about the cost anyway. But maybe fines deter people generally.'

Female, Barnsley, social group D, children aged 18

'I think the only thing that would put me off taking him out is if the fines were a lot more.'

Female, Long Eaton, social group C, children aged 10

Wealthy parents openly mocked the system, discussing lying to their schools about going on holidays.

'When I have had to register him for being off, I haven't told them we're going away, I've just lied and said he's been poorly, which is probably naughty, but that's what I've done.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, children aged 13 and 9

'As long as he's not got an obvious tan, when we've been on holiday, I've just said he's been poorly, just to avoid having a conversation. To be honest, in secondary school it's less of an issue than with primary, where you're more face to face whereas in secondary everything is done over an app or over an email, there's not really any face to face. It's quite faceless, so I don't feel bad about lying about it.'

Female, Bristol, social group B, children aged 15

'In terms of fines, if you know what the limit is, then you just make sure you don't go over it.'

Male, Bristol, social group B, children aged 6 and 8.

Some parents highlighted the 'duty of care' the school had when a child was off school, and agreed that there should be some involvement by the state, although this was targeted at families who were struggling.

'I understand the safeguarding perspective - if you haven't called them, they've got a duty of safeguarding to our children, and they should absolutely be on the phone or texting us if we've forgotten to let them know, because they're responsible for that child between those hours. But aside from that, it to be honest, it just makes me cross.'

Female, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 7

'I understand why it's hard for schools, because there's only so many hours in a day. They have to treat everyone equally and fairly, but actually, the reality is, we all have a very different family dynamics. We all have different children, different situations, and things do happen. So I think rather than sending threatening letters, there's got to be a more constructive, more personable way of figuring that out. And that just where's the where's the kind of compassion and the care in that [sanctions]?'

Male, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 5.

There was concern that sanctions would not help those who were struggling. Parents spoke about the need to 'understand the family' and a much more bespoke solution to attendance issues. They talked about the importance of 'constructive' methods of improving attendance, rather than adversarial letters, texts and fines.

'We need a human-to-human approach, and the schools taking that time and having someone to try and understand families and see what issues they have.'

Male, Hartlepool, social group C, child aged 5.

'For children who doesn't go to school, and the parents who struggle with children and trying to get them to school, like they might- they might get threatened with fines and things like that. But are their families getting the support that they need, or asking for?'

Female, Barnsley, social group D, child aged 5.

'People who are struggling financially, who probably live miles and miles from the particular school that the kid goes to, threatened with fines, if they can't afford to put food on the table - that's completely the wrong way around. You can't fine someone who hasn't got any money, that's really just putting a whole other level of stress on them. So if you've already got mental health issues, that's just going to make it ten times worse. We need to think of better ways to help them.'

Male, Long Eaton, social group C, children aged 14.

Parents thought attendance should be addressed in a more nuanced way, with 'legitimate absence' such as medical appointments not counting towards 100% attendance penalties.

'I think it [attendance] shouldn't be down for some things like- if we've children who have additional needs or that need hospital appointments or things like that.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 5, 8 and 13.

'My daughter's disabled, so she's got a lot of medical appointments and stuff. She has never had an attendance above 92% since Reception, because the appointments are taken down as lowering the attendance. I have always said I don't agree with it at all, because her overall attendance for her school time is shocking, but through no fault of her own or no fault of ours.'

Female, Blackpool, social group D, children aged 11 and 9.



Recommendations

The breadth and depth of the attendance crisis can seem overwhelming, and this research paints a bleak picture of the current situation. Attendance is a manifestation of many other issues across the education system, as highlighted in this report. Yet we know attendance correlates with both the core purpose of schools – strong attainment outcomes – and the many holistic benefits schools provide.

These recommendations are built on the voices of the parents we spoke to. They reflect the wide-ranging nature of the attendance crisis, and the gravity of it. They are system-level recommendations for a systemic problem.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen a seismic shift in attitudes towards attendance. We now need a seismic shift in how we address the challenge.

1. There needs to be a review of how schools and the wider education system communicate with parents and the messaging.

'Every day matters' is seen as hollow, and it is not engaging parents. We do not disagree with the premise that every day matters, but parents no longer believe in this messaging. Doubling down on this seems futile unless we can reengage parents.

2. Fines are deeply unpopular with parents across the social spectrum. The efficacy and implementation of fines should be reviewed and potentially abolished.

There are no silver bullets or quick fixes that will solve the attendance crisis, and fines in their current form are not the solution. Tackling absence for the long term takes trust between parents and schools. Not only do fines fail to change parent behaviour, they also undermine the relationships between schools and parents, and may well be making the situation worse.

First, review the way in which fines are implemented across England. Standardising practices nationally through statutory guidance would drive a shared, national understanding of attendance challenges.

Second, undertake evaluation into the impact of fines on attendance. If fines are shown not to improve attendance, consider abolishing them.

3. Provide intensive, nuanced support to families for whom attendance is a significant issue.

Where attendance is a significant issue, schools need to be empowered to work with the family to address the underlying causes. This is key to long term improvements. Engaging 'parents as partners' is crucial in tackling attendance; how, when and by whom parents are spoken to matters hugely.

4. Better joined up working and signposting to the appropriate agencies would ensure that those best placed to offer support were doing so.

Schools are often blamed by parents for failures in other areas of the system, including CAMHS, the NHS, housing support and the welfare system. Better join up between these different agencies to holistically address the wider challenges that impact attendance would enable schools to focus on providing the educational support they have expertise in.

A clearer understanding of which agencies could and should address wider issues that families are experiencing would also reduce 'school blaming' whereby parents hold schools accountable for all problems in their lives. This would improve school-parent relationships.

5. Improve the accuracy of school-level attendance monitoring systems so that information shared with parents is accurate.

Improving school-level monitoring systems would boost confidence from parents that the information they are being given about their child is accurate. Reducing incorrect information would improve school-parent relationships and allow schools to better target their support.

6. Highlight the importance of coding attendance – it is impossible to design strategies without this.

If national-level attendance data is inaccurate, all policy interventions flowing from it will be predicated on incorrect findings. Working with schools to ensure attendance data is coded and inputted accurately should be a priority for the Department for Education. The findings of this research underscore the importance of work already underway on attendance tracking.

7. Other strains on education system are manifesting in the attendance crisis – better-funded schools will have better attendance.

Many of the broader contemporary challenges across the education system can be seen in the attendance crisis. Recent industrial action, teacher retention and recruitment problems, the lack of investment in school infrastructure and the reduced levels of school funding are all putting strain on the system. Attendance is partly a product of these overlapping challenges.

Solving these problems will require significant additional funding across the system, but such funding would impact attendance positively.

8. SEND and CAMHS are significant factors in the attendance crisis, investing in these two areas will significantly improve attendance.

While funding wider systems will have an impact on attendance, SEND and CAMHS are two chronically underfunded areas of the system where demand is growing. Children who are not supported adequately are unable to access the education system. This can be seen in both the national attendance data and this research.

Preventative measures to support better mental health and wellbeing of all pupils would reduce demand for intensive mental health support. Increased funding and lower thresholds for early intervention for mental health support may help to prevent escalation at a later point.

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