

What Matters in Education? Briefing Note #3

Pupil Absence: Questions for policy, for research, and in practice

Introduction

The third seminar in the **What Matters in Education?** panel discussion series addressed the challenging issue of pupil absence from school. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, pupil absence from school, including persistent absence, has risen significantly, and is a matter of concern for schools, ministers and policymakers.

Key questions for the debate

What is driving pupil absence from school?

How can policymakers and schools respond to rising pupil absence in a way that is sensitive to children and families?

How can research and the experiences of young people and their families inform solutions and improve school attendance?

A summary of the panel discussion

Opening topics	Speakers
Understanding the drivers of pupil absence.	Professor Lindsey Macmillan , Director of the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, IOE.
Why addressing pupil absence means changing the narrative around families and schools.	Ellie Costello , Director of Square Peg.
Glasgow's approach to tackling emotionally-based school non-attendance.	Douglas Hutchison , Executive Director of Education, Glasgow City Council.

Panel discussion chairs : **Professor Gemma Moss**, Director of the ESRC Education Research Programme; **Professor Lynn Ang**, IOE Pro-Director and Vice-Dean Research. Chair for questions and answers: **Dr Becky Taylor**, Head of Impact and Engagement at IOE.



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What we heard: key challenges in addressing pupil absence

Pupil absence is a significant issue

- Pupil absence and persistent absence have increased significantly for all groups of pupils since 2019.
- Missing school is detrimental to achievement and has a disproportionate impact on young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

The reasons for absence are complex

- Young people reporting high levels of psychological distress are more likely to be persistently absent.
- Family financial difficulty and mental ill health are interrelated and compounding factors.
- Family foodbank use is a significant predictor of persistent absence.
- Having a special educational need is the strongest predictor of persistent absenteeism.

Looking at schooling from the outside in

- Families are often blamed when in reality they are not being listened to.
- There is an enormous tension between children being able to cope, children wanting to engage, and families having the capacity, tools and resources to navigate systems when they need help.
- Too many children find school an inhospitable and toxic place.
- There is too little recognition that children with SEND are not having their needs met, with too many broken promises about proper funding for services and infrastructure.

Picking up the challenges at local level

- Attitudes towards school attendance have shifted following lengthy periods of school closure during COVID
- A punitive approach to non-attendance doesn't work

- Positively engaging with pupils and their families requires the right staffing and funding to be in place

Questions the audience raised

Creating a supportive system: Who would be best-placed to make a more supportive approach to dealing with absence a reality?

Measuring absence: Are there alternative approaches to measuring absence that would be more useful to schools and policymakers and more sensitive to children's needs?

Research-informed policy: What do we know about what works in terms of attendance interventions?

SEND and neurodiversity: How can schools offer more inclusive support for neurodiverse children and children with SEND?

Note: Selected questions have been edited for brevity.

Ways to bring about change

The panellists agreed that a renewed focus on young people's needs is essential for improving attendance. Key recommendations included:

Policy

Fund education more generously so the factors that are driving school absence can be properly addressed:

- Increase funding for support services that enable schools to recognise and better meet young people's needs
- Plan in early support for children with SEND so that needs do not escalate over time
- Reflect on how supportive provision can best be shared amongst schools in ways that are responsive to local needs



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Research

Build a research base that can inform policy and practice

- Develop high-quality quantitative measures that can better pinpoint different factors underpinning school absence.
- Use in-depth qualitative research to understand the experiences of students and their families that are keeping them from school.
- Currently there is very little known about what works in tackling low school attendance: more research is needed in this area.

Practice

Work *with* families and pupils to support attendance at school

- Make school a more engaging place for young people to be regardless of their SEND status
- Start from a pastoral and health lens
- Work with community-based partners to help develop responses based on knowing the school's local communities well
- Make links between schools to support work in this area

In brief

To reduce persistent absence from school requires better funding for support services and by positive engagement with children and their families experiencing difficulties.

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References

To find out more about the issues discussed, follow these links:

[Burtonshaw, S. & Dorrell, E. *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis.*](#)

[Centre for Social Justice, \(2024\) *The Missing Link: Restoring the bond between schools and families*](#)

[Children's Commissioner \(2022\) *Voices of England's Missing Children*](#)

[Education Committee \(2023\) *Tackle school absence crisis with better mental health and SEND support and urgent legislation, says Education Committee*](#)

[Macmillan, L., & Anders, J. *Rising school absence: what do we know and what can we do?*](#)

[PublicFirst \(2023\) *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis*](#)

