

Education committee inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 23,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
2. ASCL welcomes the opportunity to submit written evidence to the committee's inquiry into persistent pupil absence.. In addition to the points below, we would urge the inquiry to consider ASCL's published works on [The Forgotten Third](#), and our association's [Blueprint for a Fairer Education System](#). Both of these documents give valuable context to our responses on the experience of schools and the young people they serve.
3. Our submission is based on discussions with our members and focusses on a number of areas within the terms of reference. These are: the reasons for persistent absence, reasons why persistent absenteeism is more prevalent among particular groups of pupils, and the level and effectiveness of action and support from schools.

B. Key points

4. ASCL members report that that they are continuing to witness increased anxiety post-pandemic, especially in children and young people who already have an anxiety disorder. This is having a significant ongoing impact on attendance.
5. ASCL believes that school leaders should have agency to make decisions based on their knowledge of locality and school community. ASCL would like to see a framework or code of practice for attendance that sets out good principles for all agencies and families to utilise.
6. There is currently a lack of evidence to suggest that the use of, and emphasis on, legal powers and punitive fines to 'tackle' poor attendance is effective in improving attendance.
7. Better attendance is all about relationships. One of the best drivers of good attendance is pupils experiencing meaningful success, frequently and regularly.

8. ASCL members want to see more investment in families and wider community activity outside of schools.
9. A central framework or code of practice on attendance is needed. This should be complemented by a guide which provides practical advice to local authorities, maintained schools, early years settings and others on carrying out their duties to identify, assess and make provision to meet needs and support children's attendance. Both the framework / code of practice and the guide should be developed by central government but co-designed with schools and parents.
10. Given the strong evidence that children and young people with poorer attendance are more likely to have Speech Language and Communication Needs (SLCN), there is a need to ensure that the wider education workforce is aware of SLCN and is able to identify and support the needs of children and young people in this area.
11. ASCL believes that all schools can benefit from being trauma-informed. There should be funded training to build the capacity of school staff to effectively support their most vulnerable children.

C. Comments on specific areas of interest

The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils, in particular:

- **Disadvantaged pupils,**
 - **Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds,**
 - **Pupils with SEND and those who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19,**
 - **Pupils in alternative provision.**
12. Our members tell us that the changing advice to parents from government about how to handle illness in children over the last three years has led to a confused and sometimes acrimonious situation. Parents have had to shift from obeying strict instructions not to send children into school if they have any sign of illness, to what now feels like an expectation that children must be in school regardless of illness. There needs to be a scaffolded response that can regain the trust and the respect of parents.
 13. There seems to have been little recognition of the fact that many families, as well as wanting their children's education to resume as normal after the pandemic, also needed to rebuild their lives in other ways, such as visiting overseas relatives they had not been able to see. The refusal to flex, to allow school and college leaders the agency to make exceptions to attendance rules for good reason, is, in our view, creating a longer-term attendance problem.
 14. The rising number of children on NHS waiting lists for mental health and wellbeing issues also affects their ability to attend school as normal. Schools have highlighted that there a complete lack of confidence in the availability and capacity of wider services (eg CAMHS) and other mental health services to provide timely support to children and young people and their families.
 15. In every school there are children with a variety of vulnerabilities, including children in care, those with social work involvement, those who have suffered trauma, or who have unmet emotional and attachment needs. Those children are more likely to suffer from poor mental health, less likely to reach their full potential, more likely to be excluded and more likely to be at risk of exploitation

16. ASCL believes that the emotional wellbeing and mental health of our children and young people can be supported by leaders who empower their staff to develop their own solutions, supported by a national framework. This framework, along with the necessary training for school leaders, should develop awareness of attachment and trauma-informed practice. Schools need to be properly funded to provide this support to children and young people, and this needs to sit alongside well-funded clinical and other children's services to which schools can refer children who need more expert help.
17. Attachment awareness and trauma-informed practice are helping schools to navigate support for young people no matter what their designated label. The work of Virtual School Heads in this endeavour needs to be sustained in the long term. Virtual schools look after the most vulnerable, offering specific training and support for those supporting children in care. Their work to support schools needs to be sustained.
18. It is widely acknowledged that Covid and the associated lockdowns have had a huge impact on the lives of children, particularly those in deprived areas. The average child has missed 84 days of school. Children of all ages have had reduced opportunities to interact with others and experience new places which are key to developing essential skills in speaking and understanding. [The report Speaking Up for the Covid Generation: ICAN](#) report has revealed that the majority of teachers surveyed across the UK had serious concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children's speaking and understanding.
19. This US research from [Attendance Works](#) into why so many students are missing school is extremely helpful in understanding underlying causes of attendance issues.
20. We believe that sharing a set of principles should be central to a code of practice for positive attendance. We would suggest the reconvened Attendance Alliance establishes a working group of parents, school leaders, attendance officers, virtual school leads, etc to support the DfE in finalising a strong, co-produced set of principles that all can ascribe to.
21. The principles are as follows
 - Working together with parents and the LA to ensure strong consistent attendance
 - Flexibility and new ways of working (Daniels et al, 2020)
 - Celebrating and modelling of good attendance
 - Transparent use of monitoring and sharing of data with families, parents and carers
 - Actively building strong and positive relationships between parents, pupils, LA and school which help to pre-empt and resolve difficulties
 - Developing with partner organisations referral processes and support structures for young people who are experiencing difficulty accessing school, using the full scope of support on offer in the local area
 - Clear communication which enables good parental understanding of the expectations laid out in the school policy
 - Fostering inclusive school experiences for all children, particularly those with SEND
 - Access to services that children need
 - Proactive rather than reactive approaches, based on assessment not assumption
 - Regular CPD which builds knowledge and staff confidence, e.g. trauma-informed practice, mental health first aid
 - Clarity for parents and pupils about what we mean by good attendance and its impact on their academic and holistic life outcomes

- Explaining any reward and sanctions systems and how they relate to all pupils, including those who have protected characteristics
- Explaining how school will make reasonable adjustments for pupils with SEND and wellbeing concerns in collaboration with their parents
- Regular reviewing policies and approaches, based on research evidence, evidence of impact, and feedback from all stakeholders (parents, pupils, LA and governors)

22. ASCL had proposed the following in response to the government consultation on attendance:

23. One trust told us their staff (attendance officers) are knocking on doors when a child is absent to leave sick children, or doing some shopping. This shows families that the school is on side to support the return to school, not to simply dictate it. Punitive action gives the appearance of looking strong and is simpler to enact but actually exacerbates the issue with children fearing a return and parents who feel shamed in refusing to re-engage. This type of high support, high challenge approach can be extremely effective – but also requires sufficient resources.

24. It's important to recognise that home visits are not a one size fits all solution. For example, where trust and knowledge of family and friends are well established the impact may differ from where families lack knowledge of or confidence in their relationship with the school. Research by Square Peg in Feb 2022 finds that only 8% of those surveyed felt a home visit was useful.

25. The family respondents to the Square Peg Survey 2022 is flexibility, reasonable adjustments, prioritising wellbeing, staff training and 83% said kindness.

26. Access to external services where expert help is available is vital. Support for child and family wellbeing makes a positive difference. Where schools have co-located services this is making a positive and sustained difference to family support for attendance.

27. Our schools tell us access to Mental Health trailblazers and the Mental Health Support Teams is a game changer but only a small percentage of schools are accessing these services.

28. ASCL members who contributed to the evidence collection for this inquiry also raised kindness and flexibility as important successful strategies in building family trust. Our members felt parental fines were counterproductive and have caused further damage when relationships with families are fragile.

29. Return to school interviews that also adopted a 'How can we support you?' approach have been valuable and have supported school staff to initiate the necessary reasonable adjustments to be put in place, e.g. time out opportunities during the first couple of days if feeling anxious, having a safe space and so on.

30. Age appropriate strategies are required. Strategies that are effective with younger children may not work with teens.

31. The binary approach to attendance – that attendance is always 'good', and non-attendance 'bad' – is a worrying perception to promote. If a member of staff is off sick and not feeling confident to return a phased return would be seen as acceptable and as

positive. But part-time timetables for pupils used in this way are seen as negative. There is a stigma to a phased approach that should be questioned.

32. There is undue pressure for short-term improvement. Only brave schools/leaders feel able to play the long game. Schools are questioned about the safety of children on a 50% timetable, but if the alternative is complete non-attendance then safety issues are significantly higher.
33. This is where our current punitive inspection and accountability system is a significant barrier to deep, personalised attendance practices. There is no space for a middle ground or progress over time.
34. Training and sharing good practice that can be scaled up or adapted to local areas must recognise the multiplicity and sensitivity of approach that is required. Often these good practice examples emphasize changes to the behaviours of children or parents through acquiring a better understanding of the importance of attendance on pupil progress. This may be useful but also fails to recognise that for young people who are sick, anxious or depressed this can blame and shame them and their parents.
35. Identifying a code of practice that exemplifies principles for supporting improved attendance must involve collaboration with parents and school professionals.
36. There is increasing [evidence](#) to suggest that awards for perfect attendance do not work and can even increase absenteeism. This is a reminder that extrinsic rewards can be demotivational and actually decrease the behaviours we want to encourage.
37. ASCL members highlight the need for early intervention and support services working to help schools. Our members tell us the shortage of speech and language specialists to support interventions is leading to poor access to curriculum and to social interaction. We know the following about speech and language development:
 - Over 50% of children in socially deprived areas start school with impoverished speech, language and communication skills (Locke et al, 2002).
 - On average children from the poorest 20% of the population are over 17 months behind children in the highest income group in language development at age three (Save the Children, 2014).

The impact of the Department for Education's proposed reforms to improve attendance.

38. Our members tell us the punitive response they are being asked to endorse does not work. They say it is easier to implement punitive inflexible expectations onto families but this pushes the problem into more complex territory; it compounds the issues these families are facing.
39. Fines and downgrading or shaming of schools encourages visible action or reaction that can be harmful and leads to moving young people elsewhere – AP, Independent sector, hospital etc.
40. Professor Carlene Firmin in her work to develop an understanding of contextual safeguarding has influenced the way schools support safeguarding. The recent government guidance on attendance remains an example of looking at attendance in the wrong way - emphasising the problem as one that sits with parents and their children rather than recognising the wider impact beyond the family.

41. ASCL members who attended a round table to inform the inquiry told us that behaviour policies whether described as warm/strict or zero tolerance see pupils disappearing from one school and appearing elsewhere. So looks effective but these approaches send the issues and more importantly the children, elsewhere.

The impact of school breakfast clubs and free school meals on improving attendance for disadvantaged pupils.

42. Bagel breakfasts are reportedly popular. Breaking down those broader barriers has helped families manage financially but also be able to encourage children back into school and start the day well. ASCL recognises the impact of poverty on positive school experiences and attendance.
43. ASCL calls on the government to amend the criteria for free school meal eligibility by removing the current household earnings threshold and extending the entitlement to all families in receipt of Universal Credit. This is essential in order to ensure that more children and young people living in poverty are eligible for free school meals.
44. According to the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) 1 in 3 children in poverty are not eligible for FSM. ASCL believe that all children and young people in poverty should be eligible for free school meals.

The role of the Holiday Activities and Food programme and other after-school and holiday clubs, such as sports, in improving attendance and engagement with school.

45. Family Support Workers who have a good knowledge of the locality and families can build sustained relationships that encourage families to connect with after school activity and breakfast clubs.
46. Having staff that are able to identify parental unmet need. This allows school to provide support and challenge rather than simply challenge. ASCL leaders tell us that funding for outreach functions is increasingly difficult to find.

D. Conclusion

1. Good attendance is built on effective relationships, and a positive culture that is well communicated and understood across the school community. Where this has been damaged by Covid-19 we need time to repair the structures impacted as a result.
2. Our next steps must emphasise the importance of working together for schools, parents and the local community. It is important that any additional support for schools and families adopts a place-based, contextual approach in line with other relevant policies relating to safeguarding, behaviour, positive mental health and wellbeing.
3. The punitive model of attendance is limited in effectiveness. Where children are unwilling or unable to come to school, we need to have a greater understanding of the reasons behind this, and a tailored, adequately resourced response.
4. I hope that this evidence is of value to your inquiry. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Margaret Mulholland

SEND and Inclusion Specialist, Association of School and College Leaders
February 2023