

Improving attendance at school

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Foreword

In his speech to Durand Academy on 1 September 2011, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, talked about the ‘missing million’ children who are absent from school for more than three weeks a year. He referred to the ‘educational underclass’ of children who are outside the mainstream education world and how many of them have simply not spent enough time in school to achieve academic success. He asked me to conduct this review into the problem of “truancy” and make recommendations for improving the attendance of these children.

In taking on this review I have been able to visit or speak to colleagues from the following areas: Bolton; Bradford; Essex; Greenwich; Hackney; Hammersmith and Fulham; Hertfordshire; Hillingdon; Hounslow; Lancashire; Manchester; Nottinghamshire; Oldham; Oxford; Redbridge; Sandwell; Somerset; Southwark; Suffolk; Tower Hamlets; and Waltham Forest. I would like to thank head teachers, teachers, local authority officers, education welfare officers and magistrates who took the time to share their insights and experience in a frank and open manner.

Finally, I would like to thank officials from the Department for Education for all their help in putting together this report.

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Introduction

Improving attendance

1. Attendance has been steadily improving in the last few years, but there were still 57 million days of school missed in 2009/2010. The evidence shows that children with poor attendance are unlikely to succeed academically and they are more likely not to be in education, employment or training (NEET) when they leave school.
2. There is a clear link between poor attendance at school and lower academic achievement. Of pupils who miss more than 50 per cent of school only three per cent manage to achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C including Maths and English. 73 per cent of pupils who have over 95 per cent attendance achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C.
3. Despite the improvements in attendance there remain a small number of children who are persistently absent (PA). Until recently PA applied to pupils who missed more than 20 per cent of school in any term. From September 2011, this threshold was lowered to include those who missed more than 15 per cent. This change will ensure that pupils are identified as having problems at an earlier stage, but this still tends to put the emphasis on secondary school ‘truant’ where there are the highest numbers of PA pupils.
4. ‘Truancy’ though is only one dimension and distracts attention from the cause of these problems, which is non-attendance in the early years when approved by parents. This soon becomes a pattern and establishes poor attitudes towards school. The youngest children don’t play truant from school, they are off because their parents allow them to be off. The focus of Government should be on attendance first and foremost. This requires a shift in language and a broader view that looks beyond the issue of older truants.

Trends in attendance

5. As children move up through the school system, the numbers of children who are persistently absent grow, most significantly in the final years of secondary school. Despite a lot of focus on these children under the last Government, this figure is still too high. They tend to be children who have become disillusioned with school and have stopped turning up. By the time children have reached their mid-teens it becomes more difficult for parents and schools to get these truants to attend. The majority of children whose parents are taken to court for bad attendance are in Years 10 and 11, but by this time it is often too late for prosecution to solve the attendance problems.
6. Discussions through the review have identified that patterns of attendance of this group of children are established much earlier in their school career. These children are more likely to come from families who do not value education and where the parents often missed school themselves. Evidence shows that children who miss significant amounts of their education in primary school are more likely to truant later on.
7. The best Ofsted reports set clear, timed targets for schools that have poor attendance. This means parents and governors have a measure by which to hold the school to account for future progress.

Attendance in the early years

8. There is no nationally collected data on children's attendance in nursery and reception, as school is not mandatory at this age. This means schools are not held to account for pupils' attendance until they reach the age of five. Many schools do not take measures to improve attendance until their pupils reach statutory school age, but for some children this is already too late. Children with low attendance in the early years are more likely to come from the poorest backgrounds. These children are likely to start school already behind their peers, particularly in their acquisition of language and their social development.

9. They have little chance of catching up their peers if their attendance is bad. If they fail to succeed early on in their school careers they are likely to get further behind; disillusionment with education sets in and they become excluded or begin to truant.

Government reporting on attendance

10. Schools' attendance data is published each term, but because of the way the system is set up the second half of the summer term is not reported on. This means we have no attendance data on a sixth of the school year, making the overall numbers less reliable.

11. Both the current and previous Governments have talked about reducing truancy. There has been a steady improvement in attendance in the last five years, but the focus has been on secondary schools. The roots of poor attendance are in primary schools, but the word 'truancy' does not apply to their pupils.

12. When considering attendance it is worth noting what a one percentage point improvement means in terms of days missed. An average sized secondary school that manages to improve its attendance by one percentage point represents an additional 1,300 pupil-days spent in school. That is a significant amount of education.

13. In the past schools were criticised for having high levels of unauthorised absence where children missed school with no explanation. The unintended consequence was that schools got better at authorising absence. Parents who did not send their child to school received phone calls to chase up their child. If the parent gave a plausible reason, usually that the child was ill, then the school would authorise the absence and both the parent and the school would escape censure, but the child still wasn't there. This focus on unauthorised absence deflects attention away from the most important issue—that all absence is bad for children's education.

14. Schools also applied this to holidays, where it was easier for schools to allow term-time holidays and avoid confrontation. Education welfare officers (EWOs) have frequently noted that primary schools value their good relationships with their parents, meaning they will authorise absence rather than challenge it.

15. Current regulations state that pupils may be granted up to 10 days of leave for the purpose of family holiday in a year. Some parents and schools interpret this as an automatic entitlement to an annual two week term time holiday. Primary schools currently allow children to have twice as much time off for holidays and religious observance as secondary schools. They are often not thorough enough at analysing their data, spotting patterns of absence and dealing with them swiftly. If children are taken away for a two week holiday every year and have an average number of days off for sickness and

appointments, then by the time they leave at sixteen they will have missed a year of school.

16. It is the parents who allow their child to have Monday off because the family is tired after a weekend away, who keep their child back from school because they are waiting for a delivery, or for whom a doctor's appointment in the afternoon becomes a reason for taking the whole day off who need to be challenged early, and supported to get their children back to school. It is the children in these families who are most likely to truant in Years 10 and 11.

17. If absence in primary schools is automatically authorised it means EWOs have no evidence to use to take parents to court.

18. Poor attendance is often a sign that there are some more serious issues going on in the child's home, but many schools have commented on the difficulty of getting social workers to take it seriously enough. If the family circumstances that are leading to children not being sent to school regularly are addressed early then further more serious and costly interventions from social care may be avoided.

Recommendations

- That the language of Government concentrates more on improving attendance and there is less use of the word 'truancy'.
- That Ministers focus on improving the attendance of vulnerable pupils in primary schools.
- That the Government changes the focus, when talking about attendance, away from unauthorised and authorised absence, towards making overall absence and persistent absence the headline figures to discuss publicly.
- That apart from for Year 11, national statistics on attendance are produced for the whole year, not just up until half term in the summer.
- That consideration is given to whether there need to be changes in what data is collected and how study leave is recorded in Year 11 and to the implications of raising the participation age.
- That changes are made to the pupil registration regulations to strengthen the rules on term time holidays. While head teachers should continue to have discretion, holidays in term time should be the exception rather than the rule.
- That data on attendance in reception is published along with local and national averages and this is considered when Ofsted inspects.
- That Ofsted sets specific, timed targets for improving attendance in schools where it is low.
- That all primary schools analyse their data on attendance and quickly pick up on children who are developing a pattern of absence.
- That primary schools focus on supporting parents in nursery and reception who are failing to get their children to school.

Parental sanctions

19. Parents have the legal responsibility to ensure their children attend school from age 5 to 16 where they are registered. There are many reasons why parents fail to send a child to school regularly. The best schools work with their parents to improve attendance and they offer a wide range of support to help them get their children to school. Fining parents or taking them to court is a last resort that schools and EWOs use only very reluctantly when all else has failed. However, when they do so the system must be efficient and effective.

20. When attendance falls schools can use the legal system to punish parents who fail in this duty, but this process is protracted and inconsistent. For most schools and LAs legal intervention is the end of a process that has seen the parent and child offered a range of support. Schools or local authorities may impose a fixed penalty notice (FPN) on parents whose child is not attending regularly. The parent has 28 days to pay a fine of £50; if they fail then it is doubled. After 42 days if the parent has not paid then the school or LA has to withdraw the penalty notice and the parent is then prosecuted under section 444 of the Education Act 1996. Currently 50-60 per cent of FPNs are paid.

21. The process of taking a parent to court is cumbersome and expensive. During my review, when I met magistrates, schools and education welfare officers, they frequently expressed frustration with a system that takes up to six months to get a parent to court.

22. One magistrate explained how parents could exploit the system by first pleading not guilty, then failing to attend court when they were summoned and finally not paying any fine imposed by the magistrate. These attendance cases compete for limited court time with a wide range of other offences.

23. Only a council can prosecute a parent under section 444 and, if the borough solicitor does not prioritise these cases, then they can take months to come to court. When parents are found guilty under section 444 the punishment imposed by the court varies hugely. One education welfare officer told me that whenever she sees one of the two local district judges presiding she knows the parent will only receive a conditional discharge, regardless of the circumstances of the case. Another said a magistrate had imposed one day's court detention for a mother of a Year 9 child who had not been at school for over a year. When after forty-five minutes she said she had to pick up another of her children the magistrate let her go.

24. In 2010, out of 9,147 parents taken to court and found guilty only 6,591 received a fine or a more serious sanction. The average fine imposed by the court was £165. In the review EWOs commented that within certain groups of parents the word has spread that prosecution for bad attendance is a muddled process in which there is a good chance of getting off without sanction.

Recommendations

- That the system of fines is changed to make it simpler for schools and local authorities to use and for parents to understand. Parents who allow their child to miss too much school should receive a fine of £60. If they fail to pay within 28 days then the fine should double to £120 and the money should be recovered directly through their child benefit. Where parents who do not receive child benefit fail to pay fines they would be recovered through the county court. In addition, the

local authority should continue to have the right to take persistent offenders to court, but magistrates will be aware that a fine will have been paid for previous offences and therefore their response needs to be firm.

- Persistent failure to send children to school is a clear sign of neglect and that children's social care services should work with schools to address underlying difficulties.
- That Academy chains, sponsors and individual schools are allowed to prosecute their pupils' parents for poor attendance.

Effective school practice

25. I have visited some schools that do an exceptional job in making sure parents get into good habits of ensuring their child attends early on. Jubilee Park Primary School in Tipton in the West Midlands serves a community of predominately white working class families where there are high levels of deprivation. These are parents who often experienced academic failure in their schools and they have little faith in the potential of education. Similarly Crocketts Community Primary School in Smethwick and English Martyrs Catholic Primary School in Wapping make high attendance part of their ethos. These schools have a common determination to improve and sustain attendance rates.

26. Schools like these understand that, without the opportunity to receive good teaching, every day, from the start of their school career, their most deprived pupils are unlikely to narrow the gap with their peers. These schools are on the look out for poor patterns of attendance in their nurseries and address them as soon as they become concerned.

27. Parents are supported to get their children to school with a range of measures including walking buses, home visits or even school staff picking children up when parents are in real difficulties. In addition these schools use education welfare officers, social services, the police and the courts when parents do not co-operate.

28. Parents are taught to understand the difference between minor ailments and the sort of illness that warrants a day off and head teachers refuse every request for holidays unless there are really exceptional circumstances. The head teachers of these schools see attendance as one of their most important responsibilities and, to improve it, they are prepared to spend both time and money. In these three schools, with significantly above average free school meals, attendance is above the national average and persistent absence levels are very low.

Closing remarks

Improving attendance in our schools

29. If the recommendations on attendance are accepted, then the Government will look to primary schools to improve attendance in the early years. This focus will mean that, where patterns of irregular attendance are picked up in nursery and reception, parents will be supported to get their children into school. Children with the worst attendance in the early years tend to come from the lowest socio-economic groups where attainment on entry to primary schools is often already notably lower than that of their peers. By ensuring that the parents of these children get into good attendance habits, schools will be able to do the work required to narrow this gap. Primary schools will allow far fewer term-time holidays and they will challenge parents more robustly before they authorise absence. Children will feel more included in the life of their school and will experience academic and social success. This will mean fewer children become disillusioned with education and they will be less inclined to misbehave or to truant when they are older.

30. Schools will be able to compare the attendance of their pupils in reception with local and national data and address problems more quickly. The Department for Education will publish data on school attendance that includes the second half of the summer term meaning there is greater accuracy in the figures.

31. When Ofsted inspects schools and finds attendance is not good enough they will set clear and measurable targets that governors and parents can use to hold the school to account.

32. There are many interventions that schools use to help parents get their children to school regularly, but when these don't work schools need to have effective sanctions. A more streamlined system will mean that if parents don't pay a fine within 28 days it will be doubled and taken directly from their child benefit. The threat of punishment will be more powerful, because parents will know that enforcement is a certainty. A more effective fining system will mean fewer parents will need to be taken to court.

33. One of the most effective ways that schools can improve achievement is by improving attendance. Even the very best teachers struggle to raise the standards of children who are not in school regularly. Schools that relentlessly pursue good attendance also get better overall attainment and behaviour.

Summary of recommendations

Government reporting on attendance

Recommendation 1: That the language of Government focuses more on improving attendance and there is less use of the word ‘truancy’.

Recommendation 2: That Ministers focus on improving the attendance of vulnerable pupils in primary schools.

Recommendation 3: That the Government changes the focus, when talking about attendance, away from unauthorised and authorised absence, towards making overall absence and persistent absence the headline figures to discuss publicly.

Recommendation 4: That apart from for Year 11, national statistics on attendance are produced for the whole year, not just up until half term in the summer.

Recommendation 5: That consideration is given to whether there need to be changes in what data is collected and how study leave is recorded in Year 11 and to the implications of raising the participation age.

Recommendation 6: That changes are made to the pupil registration regulations to strengthen the rules on term time holidays. While head teachers should continue to have discretion, holidays in term time should be the exception rather than the rule.

Recommendation 7: That data on attendance in reception is published along with local and national averages and this is considered when Ofsted inspects.

Recommendation 8: That Ofsted sets specific, timed targets for improving attendance in schools where it is low.

Recommendation 9: That all primary schools analyse their data on attendance and quickly pick up on children who are developing a pattern of absence.

Recommendation 10: That primary schools focus on supporting parents in nursery and reception who are failing to get their children to school.

Parental sanctions

Recommendation 11: That the system of fines is changed to make it simpler for schools and local authorities to use and for parents to understand. Parents who allow their child to miss too much school should receive a fine of £60. If they fail to pay within 28 days then the fine should double to £120 and the money should be recovered directly through their child benefit. Where parents who do not receive child benefit fail to pay fines they would be recovered through the county court. In addition, the local authority should continue to have the right to take persistent offenders to court, but magistrates will be aware that a fine will have been paid for previous offences and therefore their response needs to be firm.

Recommendation 12: Persistent failure to send children to school is a clear sign of neglect and children's social care services should work with schools to address underlying difficulties.

Recommendation 13: That Academy chains, sponsors and individual schools are allowed to prosecute their pupils' parents for poor attendance.



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