

Dear Headteacher & Governors,

Most Headteachers, attendance staff and Council officers have the humanity and professionalism to understand the individual needs of pupils and their families. Sadly though, parents across the country are increasingly reporting examples of schools, academies and local authorities making appalling decisions in the name of attendance, particularly for children with special educational needs, illness, disability, mental health and anxiety and for families dealing with sad, difficult or complex issues or simply just struggling to get by.

We are urging local and national politicians, education professionals and Council officials to look closely at the real evidence around attendance, to genuinely listen to parents, to investigate the impact their decisions are having on children and families and to think very carefully about the culture of coercion they are creating. We aim for a constructive dialogue to facilitate a more complete understanding of the issues faced by pupils and parents and a more productive approach to our shared aims of improving outcomes for all children.

Decisions around attendance at national, local and school level are being made on an incomplete and misunderstood evidence base. The Parents Union is calling for further research in this area, and is actively seeking partners to assist.

These are some of the key misconceptions we come across daily:

1. “Every day in school impacts on attainment”

This is not true. To quote the Department for Education:

*“the Department has **not** claimed a causal link [between attendance and attainment]absence ‘can’ (rather than ‘will’) affect GCSE performance,..”¹ (our bold – link below).*

Attainment - ie exam results - is a result of many complex factors, including child physical and mental well-being, parental support, mutual respect between school and families and the quality of teaching.

Analysis of the statistical links between attendance and attainment show that in some cases there is positive correlation between absence and attainment ie certain levels of absence for certain reasons are linked to higher exam results (see same reference below). The reasons for this have not been researched but it indicates that there are far stronger elements at play in a child’s attainment than just turning up to school.

If there is a causal link, there is no evidence as to the direction of that link - children with low attainment may be less likely to attend. It is probable that attendance is a proxy for a range of factors including parental social capital, support for the school, and pupil experience and motivation. Focussing on attendance figures in a way which has a negative impact on underlying, stronger variables risks producing counterproductive results.

Professor Stephen Gorard of Durham University argues²

*“Clearly, attending school for an extra year does make some difference to attainment. However, the impact on attainment of not attending school for a year, as quoted in the Luyten study, is proportionately much less than that claimed by the DfE in its interpretation of the “effect” of absences (that last only weeks, or sometimes days). **This strongly suggests that any impact on attainment that the DfE is picking up is only minimally related to the absence itself, and has more to do with the kind of systematic***

¹ Response to Professor Alan Barr https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/evidence_for_school_absences#incoming-886774

² <https://www.dur.ac.uk/research/news/thoughtleadership/?itemno=29068> also published by Royal Statistical Society at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2016.00959.x/full>

differences that already exist between those pupils who are likely to miss school and those who are not.

None of these criticisms of the DfE study are intended to condone absence from school. But the DfE, the current Secretary of State, and the head teachers who have commented on this new report in the press are wrong to claim knowledge that absence is a root cause of low attainment." (our bold)

2. The Supreme Court ruling Isle of Wight v Platt means children must be in school at all times.

The Court effectively said parents who take their children out of school without authorisation are open to be issued with a Truancy Penalty Notice. The ruling did not change Headteachers' ability to use their discretion to authorise absence. It said nothing to justify any change in policy on absence for illness. It's not illegal to be ill.

The 1996 Education Act, section 444 3b ³ clearly states: "The child shall not be taken to have failed to attend regularly at the school by reason of his absence from the school:(b) at any time when he was prevented from attending by reason of sickness or any unavoidable cause..."

3. Schools can ask for medical evidence for all absence for reasons of illness

Again, not true. Government guidelines state: "*Code I: Illness (not medical or dental appointments) Schools should advise parents to notify them on the first day the child is unable to attend due to illness. Schools should authorise absences due to illness unless they have genuine cause for concern about the veracity of an illness. If the authenticity of illness is in doubt, schools can request parents to provide medical evidence to support illness. Schools can record the absence as unauthorised if not satisfied of the authenticity of the illness but should advise parents of their intention. Schools are advised not to request medical evidence unnecessarily. Medical evidence can take the form of prescriptions, appointment cards, etc. rather than doctors' notes.*"⁴ (our bold)

BMA Guidelines specifically state "It should be noted that GPs do not provide sick notes for schoolchildren. When children are absent from school owing to illness, schools may request a letter from a parent or guardian, and this is no different during an exam period..."⁵

4. Ofsted.....

Ofsted have said:

"One of the main considerations during an inspection is the impact of any steps that a school is taking to promote and encourage regular attendance by all pupils. When we inspect schools, parents have the opportunity to register views about their child's school. Inspectors will consider this as part of the evidence in arriving at judgements about the school. If there is evidence that a school's procedures are not in accordance with any statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education, inspectors will consider this as part of an inspection. Ofsted makes no recommendations about the manner in which schools should promote and secure good attendance and punctuality."

Schools and academies set their own attendance targets. Ofsted have confirmed that they judge a school against its own targets. Schools and academies requiring medical evidence for all illness should bear in mind that this is not in line with any statutory guidance issued by the Government. Equally those who feel they have no choice about a draconian approach to attendance should be mindful of the risk such an approach will pose to parental feedback during Ofsted inspections.

5. Attendance Awards

³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/444>

⁴ Government guidelines, page 11:https://www.gov.uk/.../atta.../file/564599/school_attendance.pdf)

⁵ <https://www.bma.org.uk/.../servic.../supporting-pupils-at-school>

Parents are reporting rewards schemes for 100% attendance levels on an individual and class level. We ask Headteachers to rethink such schemes, bearing in mind this response from Ofsted's Special Adviser for SEND, Matthew Barnes to a question on award schemes: "*The issues with the policies that you have suggested are being adopted is that they do not reflect the Equalities Act. The act would require schools to amend their policies to reasonably adjust for children's needs when they have a medical condition. It's simple really. Take the child out of the stats when comparing classes, or give the awards for having the lowest numbers of unauthorised attendance. After all, if a school is authorising an absence, it should not count against any child.*"

We appreciate and thank all those Headteachers, education and local authority professionals who understand real life and who treat our children as individuals, with empathy and understanding, and who are valued beyond measure by parents. We understand the education system and staff are dealing with huge stresses and our "[**Perfect Storm**](#)" campaign supports calls for measures to address these. In the meantime, we hope you will assess your attendance policy in the light of the above information and make changes if appropriate.

Thank you.

The Parents Union
theparentsunionuk@gmail.com
www.theparentsunion.uk
t: @parentsunionuk