

Research Briefing

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School attendance in England



Summary

- 1 School attendance rules and guidance
- 2 School absence rates data
- 3 The importance of school attendance
- 4 Policy proposals on attendance
- 5 Education Committee inquiry

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Summary

Responsibility for school attendance

Parents in England are responsible for ensuring that their child receives an appropriate full-time education. When a child is registered at school, parents are responsible for securing their child's regular attendance.

There are reasons that absence from school in term-time may be authorised, most commonly for pupil illness. Authorisation of absence for other reasons is a matter for schools, but should only be granted in exceptional circumstances. It is unlikely to be granted for a family holiday. Parents may be fined for unauthorised absences.

The Department for Education has published non-statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#) which sets out the relevant roles and responsibilities of schools, academy trusts, governing bodies, and local authorities.

Concerns about school attendance levels

Since the relaxation of restrictions on schools imposed during the height of the Covid pandemic, [there have been concerns about increased absence from school](#), and in particular an increase in the proportion of children with persistent or severe levels of absence.

At the time of writing, the [estimated absence rate for the 2022/23 academic year to date](#) (which covers the 2022/23 Autumn term) was 7.8%. This is higher than in the years prior to the pandemic. The Autumn term absence rate ranged between a low of 4.1% in 2015/16 and a high of 4.8% in 2019/20.

At the time of writing, [the most recent persistent absence rate](#) (proportion of pupils missing 10% or more of school sessions) and severely absent rate (proportion of pupils missing 50% or more of school sessions) is for Autumn and Spring term 2021/22 combined. The proportion of persistently absent pupils increased from 10.5% before the pandemic in 2018/19 to 22.3% in 2021/22. The proportion of severely absent pupils increased from 0.8% in 2018/19 to 1.5% in 2021/22.

[Some groups of pupils are more likely to be persistently absent than others](#). In Autumn and Spring term 2021/22 combined, 35.4% of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals were persistently absent compared with 17.9% of non-eligible pupils.

Policy proposals

Following a consultation, in May 2022 the Government published [Working together to improve school attendance](#), non-statutory guidance aimed at supporting schools to maintain high levels of attendance.

Also in May 2022, the Government published a [Schools Bill](#). The Bill as introduced proposed to:

- Require local authorities to try to improve school attendance in their area, and to have regard to any related guidance produced by the Secretary of State
- Require all schools in England to have an attendance policy
- Allow the Secretary of State to make regulations to set out when a fixed penalty notice for school absence should be considered, and for co-ordination of these processes locally
- Extend the Secretary of State's power to regulate the granting of leaves of absence from school to include all academies

The Schools Bill, however, was abandoned in December 2022. The Education Secretary cited wider pressures, outside education, for leading to the Bill being dropped. The Education Secretary has said that post-pandemic attendance levels remain a focus for the Government.

A [consultation on potential national thresholds for fixed penalty notices](#) was open in June-July 2022. The Government has not yet published its response.

School attendance and attainment

On average, [pupils with higher absence over key stage 4 \(year ten to year eleven\) had lower GCSE attainment in 2019](#).

Pupils who did not achieve the standard pass (grades 9-4 in English and maths GCSEs) in 2018/19 had an absence rate of 8.8%, compared with 5.2% among pupils who achieved grade 4 in both subjects, and 3.7% among pupils who achieved grade 5 or above.

Pupils who were persistently or severely absent (who missed more than 10% and 50% respectively of possible school sessions) had lower average attainment. 35.6% of persistently absent pupils, and just 11.3% of severely absent pupils achieved the standard pass (compared to 67.6% of all pupils).

1 School attendance rules and guidance

1.1 Parental duties to ensure attendance

Under [section 7 of the Education Act 1996](#), parents are responsible for ensuring that their children of compulsory school age receive efficient full-time education that is suitable to the child's age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs the child may have. This can be by regular attendance at school, alternative provision, or by 'education otherwise' (such as elective home education).¹

Where a child is registered at school, parents are responsible for securing their child's regular attendance at that school. Under [section 444 of the Education Act 1996](#), parents who fail to secure a child's regular attendance are guilty of an offence, as are parents who know that a child is failing to attend school regularly and fail to ensure that they do so.

1.2 Guidance

In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published non-statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#), effective from September 2022, replacing previous guidance on school attendance.

The guidance was produced following a consultation (see section 4.1 of this briefing), and was published alongside wider proposals for strengthened requirements on school attendance, including for this guidance to be made statutory – meaning that schools must have regard to it, rather than it being advisory.

1.3 When a child is not regularly attending school

The Government has published information on the type of measures that may be used by schools or local authorities may use [where a child is missing school without good reason](#):

¹ Education Act 1996, section 7

Parenting Order. This means you have to go to parenting classes. You'll also have to do what the court says to improve your child's school attendance.

Education Supervision Order. If the council thinks you need support getting your child to go to school but you're not co-operating, they can apply to a court for an Education Supervision Order.

A supervisor will be appointed to help you get your child into education. The local council can do this instead of prosecuting you, or as well.

School Attendance Order. You'll get a School Attendance Order if the local council thinks your child is not getting an education.

You have 15 days to provide evidence that you've registered your child with the school listed in the order or that you're giving them [home education](#). If you do not, you could be prosecuted or given a fine.²

Parents may also be issued with a **penalty notice – a fine** – of £60 which rises to £120 each if they do not pay within 21 days. If parents do not pay the fine after 28 days they may be prosecuted for their child's absence from school. Fines may be issued to both parents.

Holidays during term time

Parents cannot authorise absence; only schools can do this. Head teachers have discretion to grant leave during school term-time, but this is not an automatic entitlement. The law governing such leave of absences was tightened up from September 2013.

The [Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2013](#), SI 2013 No 756, amended the [Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(England\) Regulations 2006](#), SI 2006 No. 1751, to remove references to family holiday and extended leave as well as the statutory threshold of ten school days.³

Under the revised regulations, **head teachers may not grant leave of absence during term-time unless there are exceptional circumstances**. The new regulations took effect from 1 September 2013. Background on the change is contained in the DfE's [Explanatory Memorandum](#) on the 2013 regulations.

The DfE guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#) states that:

² GOV.UK, [School Attendance and Absence](#).

³ The [2006 regulations](#) said that a leave of absence could be granted for a holiday where an application had been made in advance and the school believed "special circumstances" applied to grant that application. The regulations said that, save in "exceptional circumstances", a pupil should not be granted more than ten days leave per school year for holidays.

As head teachers should only grant leaves of absence in exceptional circumstances it is unlikely a leave of absence will be granted for the purposes of a family holiday.⁴

Persistent and severe absence

The DfE's guidance on [improving school attendance](#) highlights particular action that should be taken relating to children who have a good deal of school absence:

- Where pupils are persistently absent – for more than 10% of school time, or one day a fortnight – schools and local authorities are expected to work together to put additional targeted support in place to remove any barriers to attendance and re-engage these pupils
- When pupils are severely absent – for more than 50% of school time, and therefore absent more than they are present – the guidance states that a “concerted effort is therefore needed across all relevant services to prioritise” those pupils, which:

may include specific support with attendance or a whole family plan, but it may also include consideration for an education, health and care plan or an alternative form of educational provision where necessary to overcome the barriers to being in school.⁵

⁴ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), May 2022, p13

⁵ Department for Education, [Working together to improve school attendance](#), May 2022, p32

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School absence rates data

2022/23 academic year to date absence rates

The Department for Education has published [estimated absence rates in state-funded schools for the 2022/23 academic year to date](#). Figures are estimates because they are based on survey responses from schools which are then adjusted for non-responses.

At the time of writing the estimated absence rate for the 2022/23 academic year to date (as of 16 December 2022) was 7.8%.⁶ The estimated absence rate was highest in special schools (10.6%), followed by secondary schools (6.2%), and primary schools recorded the lowest absence rate (5.0%).⁷

Overall absence rates have followed an upward trend since the start of the 2022/23 academic year, from around 5.4% in the first week of Autumn term to 14.3% in the final week.⁸

[The Department for Education data dashboard](#) provides the most recent data available broken down by region and local authority.

Comparing provisional 2022/23 data with past Autumn terms

As outlined above, [the available absence rate data for the 2022/23 academic year to date](#) are estimates only (which at the time of writing covers the 2022/23 Autumn term). This means caution should be taken when comparing these estimates with past Autumn term data.

In the years prior to the pandemic, the Autumn term absence rate was fairly stable. It ranged between a low of 4.1% in 2015/16 and a high of 4.8% in 2019/20. Unsurprisingly, absence rates have increased since the pandemic started.

At the time of writing the estimated absence rate for the 2022/23 Autumn term was 7.8%.⁹ This is the highest Autumn term rate recorded since comparable data was published in 2006/07.¹⁰

⁶ Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 12 January 2023

⁷ Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 12 January 2023

⁸ Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 12 January 2023

⁹ Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 12 January 2023

¹⁰ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

Autumn term absence rates have increased since the pandemic after stability for several years

State-funded primary and secondary schools in England

Autumn term	Overall absence rate	Covid-related absence rate	"Persistent absentee rate"	"Severely absentee rate"
2006/07	5.9%	n/a	18.6%	0.9%
2007/08	6.3%	n/a	19.8%	0.8%
2008/09	6.4%	n/a	20.7%	0.7%
2009/10	6.1%	n/a	19.9%	0.6%
2010/11	6.1%	n/a	19.9%	0.6%
2011/12	4.7%	n/a	13.9%	0.5%
2012/13	5.2%	n/a	15.0%	0.5%
2013/14	4.3%	n/a	11.5%	0.5%
2014/15	4.4%	n/a	11.8%	0.5%
2015/16	4.1%	n/a	10.3%	0.5%
2016/17	4.3%	n/a	11.4%	0.6%
2017/18	4.3%	n/a	11.5%	0.6%
2018/19	4.2%	n/a	10.7%	0.7%
2019/20	4.8%	n/a	12.9%	0.8%
2020/21	4.6%	6.9%	12.7%	1.3%
2021/22	6.8%	1.6%	23.2%	1.3%
2022/23 estimate	7.8%	n/a	n/a	n/a

Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). "Persistent absentee rate" defined by the Department for Education as missing 10% or more of possible sessions. "Severely absentee rate" defined by the Department for Education as missing 50% or more of possible sessions. See Box 1 for the definition of "Covid-related absence".

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn term 2020/21](#), 26 May 2022 ([custom table](#) created 15 December 2022); Department for Education, [Pupil attendance in schools](#), 12 January 2023

Box 1: Covid-related absence definition

During the pandemic, Covid-related absence was reported separately to absence rates and specifically referred to pupils who were not attending school due to public health guidelines.

This includes pupils staying home due to lockdown requirements (schools were expected to provide remote education instead). Other reasons include pupils isolating with Covid-19 symptoms, awaiting a test result, or pupils required to stay home due to contact with someone with Covid-19.

Pupils with confirmed Covid-19 were recorded as absent due to illness, not due to Covid-19 related reasons.

2021/22 Autumn and Spring term absence rates

The Department for Education has published [absence rates in state-funded schools for the 2021/22 Autumn and Spring terms combined](#).

The average absence rate (excluding Covid-related absence) in the 2021/22 Autumn and Spring terms combined was 7.4%. This is an increase from previous years (in the last four years the absence rate ranged between 4.0-4.7%).¹¹

This increase was mainly driven by higher rates of absence due to illness (this includes confirmed Covid-19 cases). In the 2021/22 Autumn and Spring terms combined the absence rate due to illness was 4.7%. This was an increase from previous years (in the last four years this rate ranged between 1.7%-2.8%).¹²

Covid-related absence is reported separately (see box 1 for more detail). The average Covid-related absence rate in 2021/22 Autumn and Spring terms combined was 1.3%. This was a large decrease from the previous year (29.4%).¹³

This decrease is due to national lockdowns in 2020/21 when most children were asked to stay home (and were recorded as absent due to Covid-19) and also changes in public health guidance over the period (relating to isolation and class bubbles).

2020/21 academic year absence rates

[The most recent Department for Education attendance statistics for a complete academic year is for 2020/21](#), when the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted school attendance.

In 2020/21, 4.6% of school sessions were missed in England due to non-Covid related reasons (this was in line with overall absence in previous years).¹⁴

An additional 21.3% of sessions were missed due to Covid-related reasons. One reason for the high rate of Covid-related absence was because for most of the Spring term, in person attendance was limited to certain groups of pupils (children of critical workers and some vulnerable pupils). The Covid-related absence rate for the Spring term was 57.5%.¹⁵

The chart below shows that absence (excluding Covid-related absence) generally followed a downward trend between 2006/07 and 2013/14 (falling

¹¹ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn and spring terms](#), 20 October 2022

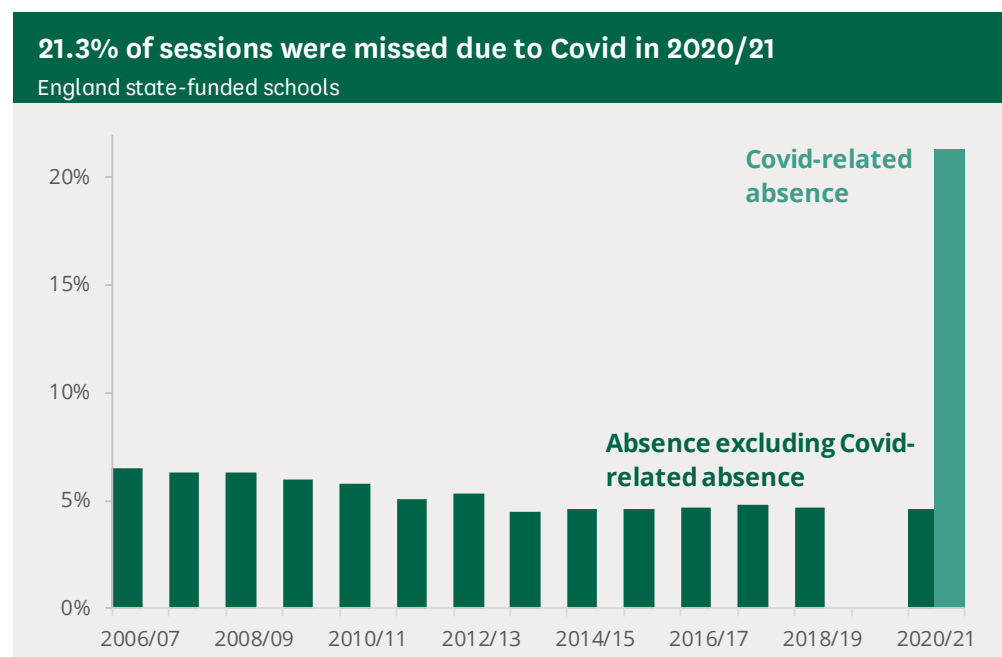
¹² Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn and spring terms](#), 20 October 2022

¹³ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn and spring terms](#), 20 October 2022

¹⁴ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

¹⁵ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

from 6.5% to 4.5%). However, it has not changed much since 2013/14 (ranging between 4.5% in 2013/14 and 4.8% in 2017/18).



Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). [Data for 2019/20 was not published.](#)

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

Broken down by region, absence (excluding Covid-related reasons) was highest in the Yorkshire and the Humber region (5.0%) and lowest in the East Midlands, East of England, South East, and Outer London region (all 4.4%). The range in absence rates between local authorities was wider (from 3.8% in Richmond to 6.4% in Bradford).¹⁶

¹⁶ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

Absence rates vary by local authority more than by region

2020/21 excludes Covid-related absence, state-funded schools

Region	Absence rate	Local Authority	Absence rate
National average	4.6%	Highest absence rates:	
North East	4.8%	Bradford	6.4%
North West	4.7%	Newcastle upon Tyne	5.8%
Yorkshire and The Humber	5.0%	Knowsley	5.8%
East Midlands	4.4%	Middlesbrough	5.7%
West Midlands	4.9%	Oldham	5.7%
East of England	4.4%	Lowest absence rates:	
South East	4.4%	City of London	2.7%
South West	4.6%	Rutland	3.0%
Inner London	4.7%	Bracknell Forest	3.7%
Outer London	4.4%	Havering	3.8%
		Richmond upon Thames	3.8%

Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon).

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

There was more variation between both regions and local authorities for Covid-related absence. This reflects differences in community level transmission of Covid, and [different local restrictions across the country](#) (also known as tiers).¹⁷ Covid-related absence was highest in the North West region (22.6%) and lowest in the South West (19.3%). The local authority with the highest Covid-related absence was Bolton (25.7%) and the lowest was the Isles of Scilly (9.6%).¹⁸

¹⁷ Gov.UK, [Full list of local restriction tiers by area](#), updated 4 January 2021

¹⁸ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

The range in Covid-related absence was higher than non-Covid related absence

2020/21 Covid-related absence only, state-funded schools

Region	Absence rate	Local Authority	Absence rate
England	21.3%	Highest absence rates:	
North West	22.6%	Bolton	25.7%
West Midlands	22.4%	Sandwell	25.3%
North East	22.1%	Havering	25.2%
Outer London	22.1%	Rochdale	24.8%
Inner London	21.9%	Luton	24.8%
Yorkshire and The Humber	21.8%	Lowest absence rates:	
East Midlands	20.8%	Isles of Scilly	9.6%
South East	20.6%	Norfolk	14.7%
East of England	20.0%	City of London	16.5%
South West	19.3%	Cambridgeshire	17.6%
		Swindon	17.8%

Note: Absence expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon).

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

Persistent absence

In 2020/21, 12.1% of pupils were recorded as “persistently absent” (defined by the Department for Education as missing 10% or more of possible sessions). This equates to around 870,000 pupils.¹⁹

The proportion of persistent absentees has increased from before the pandemic. It was 10.9% of pupils in 2018/19 (data for 2019/20 was not published).

Since 2018/19, the proportion of persistently absent pupils has increased in all types of schools. However, it increased the most in special schools (from 28.8% in 2018/19 to 48.9% in 2020/21). One reason for this increase is because throughout 2020/21 special school pupils were asked to attend school in person, unlike many mainstream pupils who were requested to stay home (and so would not be recorded as absent).²⁰

Another measure of absenteeism published by the Department for Education is the proportion of pupils missing more than 50% of possible school sessions. In 2020/21, 1.1% of pupils missed more than 50% of sessions, this equates to around 82,000 pupils.²¹

The proportion of pupils missing more than 50% of sessions has also increased since before the pandemic. In 2018/19, 0.8% of pupils missed more

¹⁹ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

²⁰ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

²¹ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

than 50% of sessions. Over this period, the proportion of pupils missing more than 50% of sessions increased in all types of schools. The rate nearly doubled in primary schools (although remained low) from 0.4% in 2018/19, to 0.7% in 2020/21.²²

Pupil characteristics

Some groups of pupils, such as those with special educational needs (SEN), or who are eligible for free school meals (FSM), or those belonging to Travellers of Irish decent or Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups, have higher absence rates on average than their peers.

In 2020/21, pupils with complex SEN which means they have an education, health, and care plan (EHC plan) had much higher absence rates than those with no identified SEN (13.1% compared to 3.9%). Pupils with less complex needs (SEN support) recorded absence rates in between these two groups (6.5%).

Pupils with SEN (and in particular those with EHC plans) are more likely than other pupils to attend medical appointments during the school day, or not attend school due to illness. In addition, as outlined above throughout 2020/21 special school pupils were asked to attend school in person.²³

As in previous years, pupils known to be eligible for FSM on average had higher absence rates than those not eligible. In 2020/21 the absence rate for eligible pupils was over double the rate for non-eligible pupils (7.8% compared to 3.7%).²⁴

In 2020/21 the ethnic groups with the highest absence rates by far were pupils who were Travellers of Irish descent, or who were Gypsy/Roma (19.1% and 15.0% respectively). Pupils who were of Chinese descent had the lowest absence rates (2.1%).²⁵

Similar trends were recorded for the proportion of pupils missing 10% or more of possible sessions or pupils missing 50% or more of possible sessions. The table below provides additional detail.

²² Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

²³ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

²⁴ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

²⁵ Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

On average, pupils eligible for FSM or with SEN have higher absence rates than their peers

England, state-funded schools, 2020/21

	Absence rate	% of pupils missing at least 10% of sessions	% of pupils missing at least 50% of sessions
National average	4.6%	12.1%	1.1%
Special educational needs (SEN)			
EHC plan	13.1%	42.3%	4.5%
SEN support	6.5%	18.9%	1.7%
No SEN	3.9%	9.3%	0.6%
Free school meals (FSM)			
FSM	7.8%	24.4%	2.0%
Not eligible for FSM	3.7%	8.3%	0.6%
Major ethnic group			
Mixed	5.0%	13.7%	1.3%
Asian	4.7%	11.5%	0.7%
White	4.6%	12.1%	1.2%
Traveller of Irish heritage	19.1%	58.8%	15.3%
Gypsy/Roma	15.0%	52.1%	9.4%
Black	3.8%	9.4%	0.9%
Chinese	2.1%	4.5%	0.6%
Gender			
Male	4.7%	12.4%	1.2%
Female	4.5%	11.7%	1.1%

Note: Table ordered by absence rate. Excludes Covid-related absence. Absence rate expressed as a proportion of possible school sessions missed (two sessions per school day, morning and afternoon). Major ethnic groups as classified by the Department for Education, Traveller of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups are included in the average for the White ethnic group category.

Source: Department for Education, [Pupil absence in schools in England: 2020/21](#), 24 March 2022

Concerns about school attendance since the pandemic

There have been widespread concerns about the dip in attendance levels since schools returned to usual patterns following lockdowns during the Covid pandemic. Particular concerns have been raised that increased [persistent absence is concentrated among disadvantaged pupils](#), such as those who receive free school meals.²⁶

Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, has said that, since the pandemic, [some parents have come to see school as optional](#):

²⁶ London School of Economics, [Rising school absences: the post pandemic education divide](#), 17 October 2022

I think there's been a very clear social contract ... the clear expectation is that parents should get their children to school every day, unless the child is too ill to go [...]

The pandemic disruption and the expectation that children should be kept at home broke that. [...]

Post-pandemic, a minority of families have just sort of lost sight of the importance of that consistency of getting children to school every day — that it's not an optional thing. It's not a 'when you feel like it, and not when you don't'.²⁷

Ms Spielman was speaking in the context of [Ofsted's annual report](#), published in December 2022, which noted that “initial high levels of absenteeism have fallen, but there are still concerns about a smaller number of persistent absentees.”²⁸

The Centre for Social Justice think tank [published a report in January 2022](#) which said that the pandemic had created a generation of ‘ghost children’ who had not returned to school, and were at significant safeguarding risk as well as educational disadvantage.²⁹

A Financial Times article in October 2022 discussed the [concerns about increased school absence](#), including links to wider problems in children's lives such as poverty or violence at home, or problems with mental illness or disability.³⁰

²⁷ Times, [Ofsted chief: Parents think school attendance is optional since pandemic](#), 14 December 2022

²⁸ Ofsted, [The Annual Report of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2021/22](#), December 2022, p11

²⁹ Centre for Social Justice, [Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown](#), January 2022

³⁰ Financial Times, [Thousands of children aren't turning up to school post-lockdown. Why?](#), 26 October 2022

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The importance of school attendance

Absence and attainment: 2018/19 academic year

In May 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published statistics on [the link between absence and attainment at key stage 2 and key stage 4](#) using data from academic year 2018/19. This was an update to [a similar report that used data from the 2013/14 academic year](#).

The DfE found there was a link between absence and attainment and concluded that:³¹

Generally, the higher the percentage of sessions missed across the key stage at KS2 and KS4, the lower the level of attainment at the end of the key stage.

Absence and key stage 2 attainment

On average, pupils with higher absence over key stage 2 (year three to year six) had lower attainment in their assessments in 2018/19.

Pupils who did not achieve the “expected standard” (see Box 2 for more information) in 2018/19 had an absence rate of 4.7%, this was higher than the rate recorded for pupils who did achieve the expected standard (3.5%). Pupils who achieved the “higher standard” (see Box 2 for more information) had the lowest absence rate on average (2.7%).³²

Persistently absent pupils (who miss more than 10% of possible school sessions) have much lower than average attainment. 40.2% of persistently absent pupils achieved the expected standard (compared to 67.7% of all pupils) and just 2.5% achieved the higher standard (compared to 11.2% of all pupils).

Box 2: Key stage 2 (KS2) assessments

Key stage 2 (KS2) assessments are taken by pupils at the end of year six (also known as SATs).

Common measures of KS2 attainment are the proportion of pupils achieving the “expected standard” in reading, writing, and maths (scaled score of 100 or above), and the proportion achieving the “higher standard” in the same subjects (scaled score of 110 or more).

³¹ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

³² Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

Absence and key stage 4 attainment

On average, pupils with higher absence over key stage 4 (year ten to year eleven) had lower attainment in their assessments in 2018/19.

Pupils who did not achieve the “standard pass” (see Box 3 for more information) in 2018/19 had an absence rate of 8.8%, this was higher than the rate recorded for pupils who did achieve the standard pass (5.2%). Pupils who achieved the “higher pass” (see Box 3 for more information) had the lowest absence rate on average (3.7%).³³

“Persistently absent” pupils (who miss more than 10% of possible school sessions) have much lower than average attainment. 35.6% of persistently absent pupils achieved the standard pass (compared to 67.6% of all pupils) and 16.8% achieved the higher pass (compared to 45.5% of all pupils).

“Severely absent” pupils (who miss more than 50% of possible school sessions) have even lower average attainment. Just 11.3% of severely absent pupils achieved the standard pass and 5.0% achieved the higher pass.

Box 3: GCSE attainment measures

Higher pass is achieving 9-5 grades in English and Maths GCSE. Roughly comparable to A*- low B under [the previous letter grade system](#).

Standard pass is achieving 9-5 grades in English and Maths GCSE. Roughly comparable to A*-C under [the previous letter grade system](#).

³³ Department for Education, [The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4](#), 6 May 2022

4 Policy proposals on attendance

4.1 Consultation and new guidance (2022)

In January-February 2022, the Government ran a consultation on [strengthened requirements for schools on attendance](#).

The consultation document highlighted the impact of the pandemic on attendance and argued that this, alongside the wider importance of school attendance, required action from the Government:

We recognise the impact that the pandemic is continuing to have on children's education, and although recent trends in attendance levels have been largely driven by covid, the government is determined to address the wider underlying causes of children not being in school, because it is the best place for their development and wellbeing. To that end it is more important than ever that agencies work together to secure the regular attendance of pupils and minimise unnecessary non-covid absence as much as possible.

The consultation made four central proposals:

- To require schools to have an attendance policy, and regard to statutory guidance on attendance
- Statutory guidance on the expectations of local authorities on school attendance
- Introducing a national framework for penalty notices for school absence
- To bring rules on authorising absence in academies in line with other state-funded schools

The [consultation response](#) was published in May 2022. The Government said it would proceed with all four proposals. The consultation response said that three of the proposals had majority support from respondents. The exception was the proposed national framework for penalty notices for school absence, where the consultation response noted that “a small majority of respondents, predominantly parents, did not agree with the proposal, [but] the vast majority of school, trust and local authority employees did agree with it.”³⁴

³⁴ Department for Education, [School attendance: improving the consistency of support Government consultation response](#), May 2022, p25

Alongside the consultation response, the Government published non-statutory guidance on [Working together to improve school attendance](#).

4.2 The Schools Bill 2022

In May 2022, the Government published a [Schools Bill](#). Alongside a wide range of other changes, the Bill proposed to take forward the four proposals on school attendance made in the January 2022 consultation, including putting the revised guidance on a statutory footing.

In the [factsheet](#) [PDF] published alongside the Bill, the Department for Education stated that legislation was needed:

To create clear expectations for schools, trusts and governing bodies, and local authorities on what attendance support they should be providing, when they should consider issuing fixed penalty notices, and when academies should grant leaves of absence. Legislation is needed to set a consistent standard of attendance support for pupils and parents, regardless of where in the country they live, and to tackle entrenched, long-standing patterns of absence.³⁵

The Bill as introduced would have:

- Required local authorities to try to improve school attendance in their area, and to have regard to any related guidance produced by the Secretary of State
- Required all schools in England to have an attendance policy
- Allowed the Secretary of State to make regulations to set out the circumstances in which authorised officers must consider giving a fixed penalty notice for school absence, and for co-ordination of these processes locally
- Extended the Secretary of State's power to regulate the granting of leaves of absence from school to include all academies

A [consultation on potential national thresholds for fixed penalty notices](#) was open in June -July 2022. The Government has not yet published a response.

4.3 Abandonment of the Bill

The Bill began in the House of Lords, and proved controversial, although it was other parts of the Bill, in particular on academies reform and a register of

³⁵ Department for Education, [School Attendance: Schools Bill Factsheet](#) [PDF], May 2022

children not in school, that provoked most discussion, rather than the measures on attendance.

The Bill was due to have its Third Reading in the House of Lords in September 2022, but this was delayed after Liz Truss took office as Prime Minister, for the new Government to assess its plans. It was reported shortly prior to Liz Truss's resignation that the Government intended to abandon the Bill, perhaps to return to some of its provisions in smaller Bills in a subsequent parliamentary session.³⁶

The Bill did not proceed any further after Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister, and in December 2022 the Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, confirmed in oral evidence to the Education Committee that [the Bill would not progress](#). She emphasised political pressures outside education, such as the cost of living and the war in Ukraine, as dominating the Government's focus.³⁷

In her evidence to the Committee, Ms Keegan said that:

We do know that there has been an impact on attendance for some children post-pandemic and we are focused every day on those who have not returned to school.³⁸

4.4 Attendance mentors pilot

The Education Secretary also highlighted an “attendance mentors pilot project” in Middlesbrough, [launched in September 2022](#) and funded with £5 million, to address low attendance,³⁹ which the Department would look to expand elsewhere in 2023:

What it does is provide one-to-one mentoring support to over 1,600 persistently and severely absent pupils over a three-year period. It tackles the factors behind non-attendance such as bullying or mental health issues, as well as that feeling of just being too far behind, and that is the actual tutoring aspect of it.⁴⁰

³⁶ Schools Week, [DfE scrambles to save key policies as schools bill set for axe](#), 19 October 2022

³⁷ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q237

³⁸ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q246

³⁹ Department for Education, [Attendance drive steps up as new term starts for millions of pupils](#), 2 September 2022

⁴⁰ Education Committee, [Oral evidence: Accountability hearings](#), 7 December 2022, HC 58, Q268

5

Education Committee inquiry

In January 2023, the Education Committee [announced an inquiry](#) into “causes and possible solutions to the growing issue of children’s absence from school.”

The inquiry planned to examine links between pupil absence and related factors such as economic disadvantage, special educational needs and disabilities, ethnic background, and whether a child or a family member is clinically vulnerable to covid-19. It also intends to examine the impact on attendance of support for pupils and their families both inside and beyond the school system, such as breakfast clubs, free meals, and after-school or holiday activities.

The inquiry’s full terms of reference are:

- The factors causing persistent and severe absence among different groups of pupils, in particular:
 - Disadvantaged pupils
 - Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds
 - Pupils with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), and those who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19
 - Pupils in alternative provision
- How schools and families can be better supported to improve attendance, and how this affects pupils and families who are clinically vulnerable to covid-19.
- The impact of the Department for Education’s proposed reforms to improve attendance.
- The impact of school breakfast clubs and free school meals on improving attendance for disadvantaged pupils.
- 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.⁴¹

The inquiry is accepting written evidence until 9 February 2023.


⁴¹ Education Committee, [MPs launch new inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), 12 January 2023

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