

Education Select Committee Inquiry: Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged groups

February 2023



School-Home Support

Education Select Committee Inquiry: Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged groups

Evidence from School-Home Support

About School-Home Support

School-Home Support is a national charity which supports families whose children are severely and persistently absent by addressing the root causes of high absence through whole family support. We are campaigning for an appropriately funded, reliable family support network around schools to support the growing number of vulnerable families who need help.

Since 1984, we have used early intervention and a whole family support approach to break intergenerational cycles of deprivation and low aspiration. Partnering with schools, local authorities and communities, our expert practitioners work one-to-one with families to establish long-term trusting relationships that build a bridge between home and school.

We look beyond the classroom to tackle the underlying causes of school absence such as poverty, domestic violence or mental health challenges, using bespoke support strategies to overcome barriers to learning and ensure children can achieve their potential.

Recommendations

- We welcome the government's intention to keep the attendance crisis at the forefront of its education plans, but to make real progress it must address the gaps in family support services through dedicated funding to strengthen support around schools. School leaders in communities with long-standing absence problems should not have to choose between teaching and learning and attendance - when they need action on both.
- The Department for Education's (DfE) Attendance Mentoring pilot provides targeted support to children and families most in need. Government must speed up the roll out of the pilot to communities where attendance is poor, and need is greatest.
- 19 of the 24 Priority Education Investment Areas (Priority EIAs) have persistent absence rates above the 2020/21 12.1% national average which we estimate equates to 194,000 children and families struggling with persistent absence. These absence levels are not solely COVID-19 related, but are long-standing systemic issues which can only be addressed if root causes of absence are tackled. According to our [impact data](#), scaling family support around schools could offer impressive benefits across these Priority EIAs, helping seven in 10 persistently absent children to spend an average of six more weeks in school, usually within a year of receiving targeted support.
- We welcome the September 2022 Statutory Guidance [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#) and in particular, the improved language around, and focus on, early intervention and whole family support to tackle the root causes of absence both

within and beyond the school gate. Where it is followed, it will help to encourage best practice on the best way to tackle attendance issues.

- However, we are concerned that without additional funding to deliver the new guidance, schools, while open to the approach, may reach for more punitive measures to deal with absence. There is very little evidence to show that fines work in the longer term, they are regressive and undermine relationships between home and school. The government should monitor the long-term effectiveness of non-attendance fines on disadvantaged pupils.
- Family Hubs should do more to raise the profile of all whole family support for attendance issues with families in need. By working with whole family support providers, Family Hubs can ensure hard-to-reach families are getting support with barriers to good attendance.
- Government should commission research to ascertain the best ways to reward schools who work with families to tackle the root causes of absence. We will be sharing our findings on this issue later this year.
- Holiday activities and food programmes, like breakfast clubs can play an important role in improving attendance and should be delivered alongside a whole family support approach. Without targeted support for some families, these initiatives don't help as they require the child to be in school to benefit. Engaging parents in the attendance improvement journey can improve the child's homelife and improve outcomes in the long-term for that child and their whole family.
- School-Home Support supports partnership working to alleviate government funding challenges around attendance work. For example, our family support practitioners collaborate with Provident Financial Group to deliver free school uniforms. This allows us to strengthen relationships with families so that deeper support work can take place. There could be a list of DfE approved delivery partners made available to businesses to encourage opportunities for CSR/ESG budgets to consider funding whole family support for attendance.

Evidence

Supporting Persistently Absent Children

Recent DfE attendance data shows that 1.6m children in England were persistently absent from school in autumn and spring 2021/22. These children are missing weeks, months and sometimes years of their education, severely affecting their future life chances.

Schools are doing their best, but they can't do it all. Having great teachers won't help these children if they aren't in school.

Most families want the best for their children but getting them to school can be challenging for families in crisis.

Local Authority Early Help services aren't able to meet the demand for support from schools and families and this is contributing to the crisis in school attendance.

School-Home Support's work has a focus on disadvantaged pupils and 72% of the families we support live in the top 20% most deprived communities in the UK (2021/22).

Too often, we see children and their families falling through the cracks, becoming invisible to key services and the vital support they need. School-Home Support believes that for some families, having a 'positive constant' through bespoke, whole family support, can make a real difference to attendance outcomes.

If, through a well-funded, whole family support service, we succeed in bringing education into the family home, improving the home learning environment, the impact on child and adult skills and aspirations could be exponential. These transformations will strengthen local economies and enable all communities to reach their full potential.

Tackling the underlying causes of absence

Our [Impact Report 2021/22 shows](#) the wide range of underlying factors which cause absence. Likely issues our family support practitioners might work on to support families with attendance are: young person transition, safeguarding gangs/youth violence, family engagement with school setting, family physical health and family housing issues, unidentified mental health issues.

The following tables summarise our impact on attendance per cohort, the average length of support and the school referral reason.

The data shows how school attendance improvements are achieved through whole family targeted support, due to a majority of underlying issues being family related.

Sometimes causes of absence identified by the school, mask the underlying causes of absence and can lead to incorrect referrals to other services. This can be the case when mental health issues are cited as the issue driving absence. Working with the family on a more intensive basis exposes practical problems where immediate support can be provided. This helps to alleviate stress and allows for more time to focus on issues like school attendance.

Top issues for children and parents/carers over the last two years are:

Parents/Carers

1. Progress to work
2. Home & money
3. Parent/carer wellbeing

Children

1. Education & learning
2. Feelings & behaviour
3. Confidence & self esteem

Challenging home lives are driving high levels absence

Factors causing absence haven't changed, but they have intensified as family life becomes more difficult post-pandemic and during the cost of living crisis.

Our evidence shows:

- Practitioners completed 56% more support interactions: meetings, phone calls 1 to 1 sessions.
- Intensive casework rose by 30% compared with 2020/21.
- Families with two or more serious presenting issues at referral was 67% compared 65% in 2018/19, this is down since the pandemic.
- Families presenting with home and money related issues at referral e.g. poverty, housing evictions rose by 82%.

All School-Home Support (SHS) Families	Average support length by SHS	Baseline average attendance	Attendance improvement after SHS support	Extra days in school	Top 3 school referral reasons
persistently absent (<90%)	8 months	70%	6%	12 Days	Family Engagement with school setting YP Mental Health Family Routine & Boundaries
severely absent (<50%)	7 months	25%	27%	54 Days	Family Mental Health YP Mental Health Family Engagement with school setting

Ethnic Minority Background Pupils

From our 2022/23 data from our work across England, ethnic minority background pupils are most at risk of being persistently and severely absent.

Ethnic Minority Background Pupils	Average support length by SHS	Baseline attendance average	Attendance improvement after bespoke support	Extra days in school	Top 3 school referral reasons
persistently absent (<90%)	10 months	70%	6.1%	12 Days	Family Physical Health Family Housing Issues Family engagement with learning
severely absent (<50%)	7 months	26%	18.7%	36 Days	YP Mental Health Family Mental Health Safeguarding gangs/youth violence

Alternative Provision Pupils

The biggest factor causing both severely absent and persistently absent young people in the current 2022/23 cohort of Alternative Provision schools, is family mental health. We have strong outcomes for this group - on average improving attendance by 44% which is an extra 88 days in school for the severely absent young people in Alternative Provision schools.

Alternative Provision Pupils	Average support length by SHS	Baseline average attendance	Attendance improvement after bespoke support	Extra days in school	Top 3 school referral reasons
Alternative Provision -persistently absent (<90%)	6 months	36.5%	29.5%	59 Days	Family Mental Health YP Mental Health YP Transition

Alternative Provision -severely absent (<50%)	6 months	17.8%	44%	88 Days	Family Mental Health YP Mental Health Safeguardin g gangs/youth violence
---	-----------------	--------------	------------	----------------	---

SEND Pupils

SEND pupils and families tend not to be referred to us for attendance issues. The main focus of our work is on pupils accessing education once they are in school, which involves close partnership with schools and multidisciplinary agencies. For example, practitioners signpost services for SEND diagnosis or help parents/carers and schools prepare evidence for an Education, Health and Care Plan.

Lack of Early Help support available to schools and families

There is a recognition that a major issue across all groups is a lack of support for families from local services including Early Help. As part of our work, we are researching the number of school referrals to local authority Early Help which are returned without action to understand the impact on attendance support in light of increased thresholds.

Our frontline experience is that demand for family support far outstrips supply. As Early Help isn't a statutory service, funding hasn't kept pace with the growing need. Without Early Help support, families are unable to access crucial services and council support, which leaves issues in the home unresolved often contributing to severe and persistent absence.

Anecdotally, we know that school leaders have low expectations of support they can get for families. As the circumstances driving increased need for support show no sign of abating, we expect the next couple of years to exacerbate the mismatch between demand and supply, unless new protected resources are allocated to family support.

[A report by a coalition of leading children's charities estimates](#) that the 64,000 children a year missing out on Early Help services are re-referred to children's social care within 12 months. For every two children that receive preventative, targeted early help support, there are three children receiving more costly social care interventions. Nine out of 10 local authorities cut early intervention spending between April 2015 and April 2020.

Findings from our Freedom of Information requests on this issue will be published later this month.

Case Study - Emir's Story

Emir and his mum Aisha had suffered a devastating loss when Emir's dad passed away. The family's stability and routine was disrupted, leaving Emir struggling with his emotions and mental health, Emir felt anxious about attending school and his attendance fell to 83%. He would regularly lash out at his mum. With grief, and financial difficulties, Aisha's mental health deteriorated, so dealing with Emir's poor attendance was a challenge.

When school first introduced Laura first to the family, she didn't focus on attendance, but listened to Aisha and Emir to understand the challenges they faced. Laura supported with new routines for the home and helped with referrals to bereavement and mental health agencies.

Laura referred Emir to the Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service (CAMHS), to get professional support to manage his grief. Laura was a friendly, reliable face to talk to at school and this reduced Emir's anxiety about attending.

Laura worked with mum Aisha to build her confidence and skills so she could regain stability in the home. With a parenting course Aisha found new tools to rebuild her family routine and develop strategies to help when Emir lashed out. With the tools provided by Laura, Aisha was able to build her resilience, and improved the home learning environment for Emir.

When Laura first met the family she worried that Emir's persistent absence would be a significant challenge, but with support, Emir improved his attendance to 87%, and is much happier at school. With Aisha's improved confidence, Laura has every hope that Emir's upward trajectory will continue.

By investing in the School-Home Support model of early intervention and whole family support, we can halve the cost of tackling Persistent Absence.

Persistent absence is the thin end of the wedge. By investing in bespoke family support to tackle poor attendance early on, we can halve the lifetime cost of tackling persistent absence.

It costs us approximately £1,000 to directly support a family struggling with attendance. It's an upfront investment which offers an excellent return on investment compared to the £1,965 annual cost to the public purse of supporting someone who is missing at least five weeks of school.

With a fully-funded family support system, schools can have early access to family support professionals who have the skills to build strong and lasting relationships with families and the time to understand and tackle the root causes of poor school attendance.

We want more organisations to deliver our model and approach so more families can get the help they need.

Case Study on partnership working - Working with Provident Financial Group to provide free school uniforms

School-Home Support supports partnership working to alleviate government funding challenges and one successful example is our collaboration with Provident Financial Group with whom we provide free school uniforms to children across Bradford, Liverpool, Manchester and Blackpool. The fund will benefit more than 1,000 children and is distributed via our family support practitioners and Dixons Academies.

Inadequate, ill-fitting or dirty school uniforms can be a huge barrier to attendance. School uniforms can cost up to £300 annually, way beyond the means of many families. Rising energy costs limit families to one washing machine load each week, which is a challenge for a child with only one set of clothes.

Our scheme provides vital support to families, distributing school uniforms, so that children can attend school feeling confident. For whole family support services such as ours, meeting material needs early on can be the catalyst towards deeper engagement where further barriers to education can be explored and tackled.

Evidence on the long-term cost of absence - from persistent absence to exclusion

According to [government funded research](#) for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the annual cost per individual missing at least five weeks of school (those below the persistent absence threshold) is £1,965.

For each percentage point of unauthorised absence, the likelihood of permanent exclusions increases at the same rate, according to the government's 2019 [Timpson Review](#).

According to the 2017 Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) [Making the Difference report](#), each excluded pupil costs the state around £370,000 in additional education benefits, healthcare and criminal justice costs across a lifetime equating to an additional £2.8bn cost to the Treasury for the 2018/19 yearly cohort of (7,894) excluded pupils.

A 2012 report from New Philanthropy Capital, [Misspent youth: The costs of truancy and exclusion](#), estimated the total cost of regular school absence to the economy was £800m per year or £8.8bn for the 11 years a child is typically in school. This analysis found that the average unit cost of a young person who is regularly absent from school is £44,468 (over the working lifetime of the child). Analysis of the impact of persistent school absence on individual areas of public policy finds that the lifetime extra cost of crime committed by a truanting child is £6,776 and £33,694 in lost earnings.

The report also suggests an aggregate saving of £3.8bn (adjusted for 2020 prices) would be made if all preventable persistent absence was addressed, the equivalent of £354m per annum. A return on investment analysis for returning a persistently absent child to school and improving attendance found that every £1 spent produced £11.60 in savings over the working lifetime of the child. Half of these savings accrue to the individual and half to the taxpayer. The report notes this represents a potential annual saving of £250m per annum.

Conclusion

School-Home Support has been using early intervention and a whole family support to break intergenerational cycles of deprivation and low aspiration for nearly 40 years. Our replicable and cost effective model is a sustainable way of tackling absence offering a strong return on investment. We'd welcome the opportunity to share our experience and discuss how it can be made available to more schools and families.

For further information about this submission, please contact:

Rachael Kenningham

School-Home Support

rachael.kenningham@shs.org.uk

ENDS