

Subject: Education Select Committee Briefing for the One-Day Inquiry into School Attendance, 22nd July 2025

Supporting At-Risk Pupils with Whole Family Support – the Missing Piece in the Government’s Approach to Tackling School Absence.

About This Submission

School-Home Support is a national school attendance charity that works directly with families to address the root causes of absence. Through partnerships with schools, local authorities, and communities, our expert practitioners provide one-to-one, whole-family support – building trust and bridging the gap between home and school. By tackling the underlying issues that prevent children from attending, they help to overcome barriers to the education they need to help them flourish.

The Impact of the Department’s Recent Measures on School Attendance

School-Home Support welcomes the excellent start the Government has already made in addressing the nation’s concerning and persistent issue of school absence. The Bill, the wider reforms, and associated funding all support the ambitions set out in the August 2024 Guidance, which rightly prioritises a ‘support first’, family-centred approach. The fact that there has been a cross-party focus through the change of Government is also extremely welcome. However, despite significant effort, the focus on improving attendance since the pandemic has not significantly moved the needle according to the most recent data releases – persistent absence has improved only marginally, and severe absence has worsened. Both are still drastically higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Recommendation to the Education Select Committee

The Government has set a strong course on school attendance, but it needs to go further and faster to tackle the scale of the crisis. That the Secretary of State for Education continues to show strong national leadership on this topic is crucial to delivering success.

In our [Route Map](#) for Government, School-Home Support highlighted the need to review the implementation of the much-welcomed Government guidance. We therefore warmly welcome this timely inquiry as we approach the one-year anniversary of this guidance being in place. Our concern, as raised throughout the Spending Review period, is that schools and local authorities have neither the specialist skills nor the capacity to deliver the support-first, family-centred approaches required in the guidance. They have been operating in a sanctions-based system for a long time, and it will take resources and capacity to upskill staff.

Anecdotally, we hear that in some places the pace of change in culture and practice is slow.

We therefore recommend that the Government fund a dedicated focus on whole-family support, which includes:

i) Funding a model of access to a family support practitioner for every school to target children missing between 15%–50% of school – an early intervention approach to reduce the number moving into the most severe absence category.

ii) Requiring schools to train staff in support-led, family-centric approaches and providing support to enable the necessary training to take place as soon as possible.

Detailed Comments

We can think about student absence in three groups, with steadily increasing levels of absenteeism:

1. Those absent for 15% of the time or less
2. Those absent for between 15% and 50% of the time
3. Those absent for more than 50% of the time

With additional training and development, the first group can be dealt with directly in and through schools. The third group is in need of specialist services commissioned outside of schools. To some extent, policy has focussed on both of these groups and, while there is always more to be done – in particular around upskilling school staff to deliver the mandatory guidance that schools adopt a support-led, family-centric approach – the policy direction and intervention suite is clear.

Our experience at School-Home Support leads us to conclude that this second or ‘middle’ group cannot be reasonably and sufficiently tackled by a schools only-based approach. The only way to address the complex issues resulting in children being absent at this level – despite not being the most severely absent – is to take a whole-family approach and to understand and resolve the issues that exist for each family in a bespoke and more intensive way.

An approach that is still predominantly focussed on the child can be more limiting. For example, the Attendance Mentors Programme has evolved since the pilot but is still a 1:1 mentor/child approach, with the family brought in as and when. A better approach involves co-creation of support plans with families, parental engagement, and trust-building from the outset – all of which are critical to attendance and wider outcomes, including improved parental engagement, sustainability, and long-term resilience.

Filling in the policy gap - 15%-50% absence

Our view is that there is a significant opportunity to address group 2, this “missing middle” – to align learning from Supporting Families programmes and the work on school absence, to create space and dedicated funding targeted at a series of evidence-based interventions to reduce the number of children who are absent from school between 15% and 50% of the time. This early intervention approach would reduce the number moving into the most severe absence category – the hardest to tackle – and where we know there is an increasing problem.

Why Do Whole-Family Support Interventions Work?

School-Home Support’s model and approach were highlighted by the Education Select Committee during its 2023 Inquiry as a blueprint for support-first, family-centred approaches.

i) The whole-family support model understands that resolving a child’s attendance issues necessarily involves supporting their family with their wider challenges. It involves working collaboratively to design bespoke support plans to address the needs of children, young people, and their families. This can include emotional wellbeing, relationship building, time management, parental engagement, financial advice, and more. It is individual to each family and often requires someone to facilitate collaboration between different local organisations. It also includes practical and emotional support for the family.

ii) We tend to think of a whole-family support model like a GP, with three main responsibilities: to triage, to signpost to other services, and to provide practical and emotional support. This approach delivers more efficient interventions, helping to deliver services more quickly, and ensure people who don’t need it aren’t unnecessarily referred to more expensive and specialist services. It can also help bring parents closer to the education system, both for their children and themselves.

iii) At School-Home Support, we have been delivering these kinds of whole-family services since 1984. We have a wealth of evidence to show it works. From our 2023–24 Impact Report:

- 86% of severely absent children increased their attendance by 20%, resulting in an average of 40 extra days in school per child per year.
- 73% of persistently absent children increased their attendance by 10%, resulting in an average of 20 extra days in school per child per year.

Beyond additional days in schools, our model delivers wider benefits which can’t be measured in terms of days in school- halting decline in falling attendance, keeping children in the system, and their families engaged. These are crucial to sustained attendance improvements.

Return on Investment

We know from our own programmes that funding whole-family support yields a significant return on investment. It costs approximately £1,000 to fund one tailored plan per child per year. According to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2022, there was a £2,166 annual cost associated with each child missing at least five weeks of school. In other words, it is over £1,000 cheaper per child per year to invest in

this approach than not – and unlike many social programmes, the returns come in a very short time (because the child or young person returns to school).

We propose a model of access to a family support practitioner for every school. We believe that bespoke, whole-family support is necessary to identify the unique root causes of absence in each family and co-create solutions to ensure families are supported to get their children into school.

In Line with the SHS Model, Whole-Family Support Practitioners should:

- Work with, but not for, schools and statutory services.
- Not be timetabled or structured in other roles, ensuring they are a dedicated point of contact for families both in and out of school hours.
- Be professionally trained and supervised in family engagement work.

These elements are key to building trust with parents, identifying the root causes of absence, and co-creating solutions to address barriers to school. Practitioners promote positive engagement between schools and parents by providing practical and emotional support to families who are often dealing with complex, overlapping challenges – where school attendance becomes a secondary or even tertiary concern. Their remit includes attendance but also delivering broader outcomes.

This sort of work requires consistent effort over sustained periods, including family engagement, and therefore needs dedicated and specialist staff. Schools working with one of our family support practitioners report that they add capacity and expertise to the whole-school approach to attendance, as well as providing bespoke and targeted support for complex cases.

Half of the children SHS support are currently in the 15–50% absence category. Young people supported in primary settings in this band achieve an average attendance increase of 7.2%, equating to an extra 14 days in school per young person.

Our approach also delivers broader positive outcomes, such as better home and school engagement, enhanced skills and resilience in vulnerable families, and improved wellbeing. Notably, our 2023–24 impact data shows:

- 89% of children and young people reported an improvement in their wellbeing as a result of support from School-Home Support practitioners.
- 80% of parents/carers reported an improvement in their engagement with their children's school and learning.