

Education Select Committee evidence session on ‘Why are so many children still missing school?’

Written evidence from the National Education Union

July 2025

Ahead of the deep-dive evidence session on 22nd July, the NEU is submitting this evidence which we hope helps inform questioning.

Current strategies employed to tackle attendance

We do not agree that fining parents supports improved attendance. The Department for Education have provided no evidence that this is the case. We would like to see evidence of the extent to which enforcing legal powers on parents actually improves attendance. We do not believe that criminalising parents solves the causes of poor attendance and this has a disproportionate effect on families living in poverty. It would be useful to know how many young people are withdrawn from school completely by parents who fear getting fined or worse and need support with their child’s attendance, SEND etc rather than punitive approaches.

Our concern is that where schools are more inclusive, persistent absence could be higher for medical, FSM, SEND and other reasons. We also know that students living in poverty are more likely for many reasons to miss more time out of school (e.g. caring responsibilities, uniform issues, hunger, not having school equipment etc). Schools and local authorities which work closely with Traveller families and ensure their inclusion may also require greater flexibility as families travel and students may miss periods of schooling.

Areas we recommend the Select Committee should investigate:

- How belonging and trauma-informed whole school approaches improve student attendance – how can students see value in coming to school?
- The extent to which earlier, quicker and increased mental health and SEND support for schools, students and families would improve attendance (*see graph below on page 3*)
- The extent to which scrapping the two-child benefit cap would lift children out of poverty and improve attendance?
- To what extent does the current curriculum and paucity of assessment pathways affect student attendance? Would a more creative, flexible and inclusive curriculum and assessment model improve attendance?
- The extent to which increased pastoral resource would enable improved parental and community engagement and improved attendance

Strategies to tackle school absence - overview

School policies should incorporate principles on supportive attendance pathways as opposed to non-attendance escalation processes.

The biggest reason for absence is due to social, emotional and /or mental health challenge for the child and /or family due to unmet, unrecognised, or undiagnosed need. Many children remain on growing waiting lists for specialist assessment and support and are unable to attend school during this period.

Pupils from low-income households are less likely to be ready or able to attend school due to the additional barriers they face compared to their wealthier peers. Our members tell us about poorer children who arrive at school without all their needs having been met; it is not surprising that these issues would prevent children attending school in the first place.

“I have students who fall asleep in lessons because they haven’t eaten or haven’t been able to get a good night’s sleep because of the environment they live in. I have students coming to school in -5 degrees without jumpers or coats. I have students coming to school in pouring rain with holes in their shoes because they can’t afford new ones. How are these students supposed to succeed in the same way as students who have all the basic requirements to live in a clean, warm and safe environment?!”

Schools need the following measures in place in order to support students at risk from persistent absence more effectively:

- time and sufficient staffing numbers with the right level of training and experience to support students and their families struggling with attendance. NEU members told us in a survey conducted in early 2022 that support and engagement with families were key strategies in improving school attendance. Schools need the time and staffing levels to achieve this engagement.
- better local partnership with health and social care services
- greater flexibility around the curriculum and assessment-a wider range of qualification pathways are needed to ensure success for all children and young people
- timely access to specialist support services and professionals
- More flexible behaviour policies-with a greater focus on belonging and trauma-informed approaches (cultural change and cost neutral)
- Greater flexibility around uniform policies. Many SEND students struggle with sensory issues around uniform which can affect attendance and children living in poverty may not have the means to meet strict uniform requirements.
- Toilet access policies affect many SEND students and those with mental health conditions. Anxiety is increased by refusal of many schools to allow use of toilets during lesson time and to ensure enough time for students to visit the toilet during breaktimes. The anxiety and fear of embarrassment affects the attendance of students and could be easily addressed with a cultural shift

These measures, if funded properly, would better tackle the issues of non-attendance and remove some of the barriers to attendance that children and young people face than the current measures focussed on punitive punishments and parental fines.

The minimum expectations in relation to attendance that the NEU would wish to see include ways in which schools:

- have a holistic approach to attendance
- manage support for students struggling to attend for a variety of reasons
- work with specific groups at greatest risk of persistent absence such as GRT, SEND, FSM students and students with mental health issues
- respond to individual needs relating to attendance
- policies include analysis of patterns of attendance
- absence recording includes a T-code used for GRT absences related to travelling as well as appropriate codes for absences relating to school-based anxiety induced absence.

Evidence

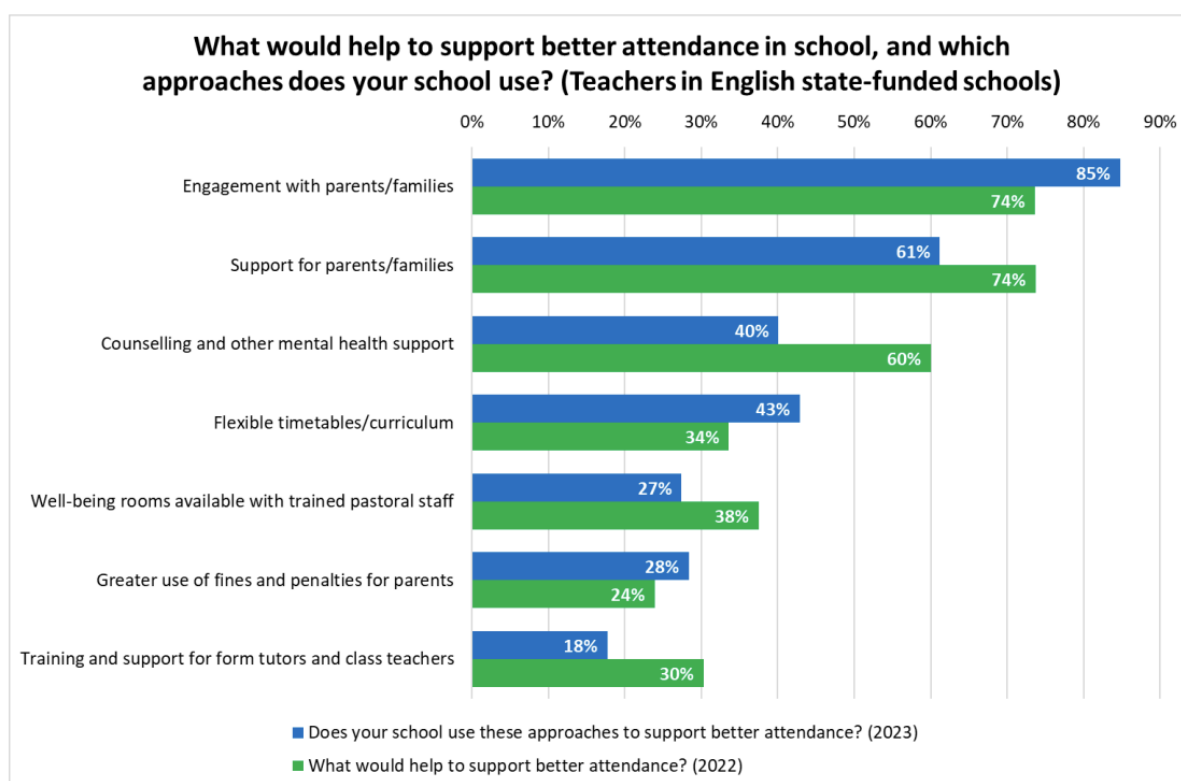


Figure 35: What would help to support better attendance in school, and which approaches does your school use? (Teachers in English state-funded schools)

To improve pupils' attendance, they must see value in school. Schools must undertake a whole-school approach to wellbeing and mental health and develop a sense of place and

belonging that will allow their communities to thrive. The [NEU commissioned research by UCL](#) which shows the positive impact and importance of creating a sense of belonging. The Government should provide support and funding for schools to develop such whole-school approaches.

Curricula and assessments that are relevant to pupils and their communities will make pupils more likely to engage and see purpose in their education. Teachers need more time in their day and space in the curriculum to spend creatively, tailoring lessons that are relevant to their pupils and communities. However, teachers' workloads are already beyond capacity, as less than one-fifth tell us their workload is manageable most or all of the time, while around half say it is unmanageable most or all of the time.

“SEND and mental health is a huge issue at my school. I feel the nature of the exams is awful. The students cannot even access the exam papers. With there being no foundation or SEN paper it ruins the idea that education is inclusive, it definitely isn't!”

[NEU: The State of Education 2023](#)

Mental health problems among children are worsening, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic, and children with mental health issues are [significantly less likely](#) than those without to feel safe or enjoy school. Meanwhile, 97% of teachers told us that their workload is a barrier to them supporting pupils' mental health. As a result of chronic underfunding of social support for children and families, the demand for support can fall on already-overworked school staff. Combined with an overburdensome system of curriculum, assessment and accountability, educators and pupils alike are at their limits.

“The children being turned away for CAHMS support is appalling, there's children not qualifying that absolutely should be but I assume it's because CAHMS are overstretched. We have 2 members of staff who run support groups for children who need it, but it's not enough for the amount of children who require support. Teachers don't have the time to support students in the way they would like to because the curriculum is being so jam packed into the day and the amount expected.”

[NEU: The State of Education 2023](#)

Two-thirds of teachers told us they do not have enough access to CAMHS support for their pupils, while a further quarter of teachers said there was no CAMHS support at all. Access to school counsellors and nurses was also reported by 80% of teachers as being insufficient. The lack of funding for both internal and external support staff leaves schools without the capacity to give pupils the help they need to ensure they attend school.

“The levels of self-harming and students staying away from school or being too anxious to get into the classroom is really worrying.”

[NEU: The State of Education 2023](#)

[A study between the University of Cambridge and the charity Place2Be](#) found school-based one-to-one counselling could reduce persistent absence by 18.5%. In follow up research, children with better mental health after counselling had stronger engagement and enjoyment of school. The Government should hear the calls of educators, health and families, and invest in support services and staff both in and out of schools.

Schools, local authorities and relevant services should be resourced sufficiently by government to give additional support to groups of students most at risk of persistent absence. Pupils with SEND are not able to access the support they need to thrive in school. Young carers and children from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller backgrounds are more likely than their peers to be absent, and also likely to have specific needs and issues. Schools need the capacity and resources to work with these groups to provide individualised responses to absence, and ensure they have the support they need to attend school.