

# Written evidence submitted by Leeds Trinity University

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## About this Evidence

The following evidence is presented by a team of academics from Leeds Trinity University and the University of Leeds who have collaborated on the 'British Families in Lockdown' study [BFiL] led by Leeds Trinity University. BFiL continues to collect data on British family experiences and has done so since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. Evidence presented here is drawn from different methodologies used across the study, which includes an online questionnaire on lockdown experiences and attitudes [2021] and 88 qualitative interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022.

The coronavirus lockdowns provided parents with a unique opportunity to reflect on the school experience during a period of hiatus and they shared these with our researchers during the different waves of our study. It became clear that home learning brought both challenges and benefits to parents and pupils and that for many parents, a new focus on their children's well-being emerged. This resulted in questions being asked about the value and quality of previous and existing school provision, which in turn raised concerns about future attendance.

We believe there are two dominant questions to be addressed related to absence from school.

- 1) Do children and parents always have a choice regarding their attendance? Might illness (mental and physical of parent or child), poor financial circumstances or practical challenges preclude attendance?
- 2) If parents and children are in a position to make choices about attending school, why might they decide not to attend?

Our evidence will focus on answering the second question, whilst offering some insights into the first.

## Introduction

It can be argued that attendance at school should not be enforced if it is perceived to be to the detriment of a child's physical or mental health, yet there is some way to go in establishing how this can be reliably ascertained. Pupil and parent perceptions of risk to health and well-being are not considered reliable. Instead, schools currently feel that they are only able to approve children's non-attendance related to physical or psychological difficulties, if the concerns are medically certifiable. Even if certification is provided, schools may still exert pressure upon families for children to attend if they feel the ailments can be managed by the school. This necessitates parents and pupils to trust schools to deliver on this care.

The extent to which families and schools trust each other when it comes to the best interests of children is uncertain. The pandemic raised a number of concerns across society related to who are the trusted voices. We collected evidence that shows how some parents lost trust in teachers during the home schooling experience. This can be seen as part of a broader trend indicating disregard for the quality, integrity and reliability of key elements of national infrastructure, including for example: The police, the BBC, the NHS, schools and the Government.

Schools across the nation are known to be stretched in terms of resources, with teaching unions often striking as they campaign for better conditions for teachers. Record numbers of teachers are leaving the profession with the National Education Union reporting that 44% of teachers intend to

leave their jobs by 2027. As such, is the enforced attendance of children into settings which are failing its staff an appropriate expectation? According to NHS data, a child with a possible mental health disorder is twice as likely to miss school as one without, and there are rising concerns about the mental health of young people at school. The national curriculum places significant pressure on children to achieve targets, whilst bullying and school related interpersonal violence are commonly reported in the media. In this context, is it a surprise that parents and pupils may in some circumstances choose non-attendance for the benefit of their well-being?

The participants in our study were vocal regarding their concerns about children going back to school following the pandemic. The enforced non-attendance during lockdown provided parents the space and time to reflect on schooling and to see the difference in their children from being at home more. For the majority of parents, the short-term impacts of being at home during the first lockdown was positive for the whole family and some schools were more reliable and trustworthy than others in supporting children.

### **Quality of Provision: Private schools and State Schools during the Pandemic**

Independent schools have historically experienced high levels of attendance with fewer issues connected with absence or children missing from education. This may in large part be due to the diligence of parents who are not wanting to pay fees if children do not attend. However, it may also be that from a child's perspective, the school experience in a private setting is more enjoyable and more rewarding. Teachers who are well paid and feel that they are in a fulfilling and well-supported role may spend more time investing in creating a positive school experience. This is an under-researched area, but during the lockdowns we saw a difference between how private schools and state schools performed. Privately run schools were fast to act and seemed to offer much better support for pupils including regular video conferencing and more teacher to pupil time; instilling trust and confidence in parents. Some private schools also encouraged peer-to-peer learning online. Conversely, many pupils at state-run schools had no personal contact or direct dialogue with their teachers for months and learning was poorly organised. Parents were often disappointed that their children at state schools had little or no contact with teachers during the first lockdown. Furthermore, many parents of children attending state school were critical of the work that was sent home, either the lack of it, or the perception that it was too difficult. This affected levels of trust between parents and state schools. The difference in quality of provision can be reasonably assumed to be connected to the differences in funding and resource.

### **Children's Well Being is a New Priority for Many**

Many parents prioritised their child's well-being as being more important than their educational attainment during the first lockdown and allowed their children to set their own work timetables. By spending more time together throughout the lockdowns, familial bonds increased for most families, as they were able to share more activities and experiences together. Some parents, critical of the work sent home from school, created their own home learning curriculum. Some parents even felt that the education they were able to give their children during lockdown through home learning superseded the learning experiences that they were getting in schools. When asked about what the children were missing by not being at school, most parents felt it was a lack of interaction with other children, not the teaching.

Several parents identified the schools and early years settings as a cause of negative mental health outcomes for their children and felt that lockdown and the home learning environment was beneficial for children. In particular, some children who had been victims of bullying or who

experienced regular anxiety at school were benefitting from being at home. These parents often felt that the schools were unable to support their children and they were nervous about the children returning to a school setting following the pandemic.

Parental worries about their children returning to school after lockdown were also connected to the threat of coronavirus. Particularly when there were clinically vulnerable people within the household. Several parents considered that the prospect of their children attending school/nursery on a part-time basis in the future would be beneficial for their child, both academically and in terms of mental well-being. A continuation of partial home schooling was something that many parents expressed an interest in, particularly if it was also associated with a shortening of the working week. This never materialised as an option provided by government during the recovery.

During the first lockdown, children were reported to be missing their school friends, but not missing the school itself. Most children appeared to be positive and engaged with their home learning, and it was noticeable that some children were willing to complete their studying either independently or under parental guidance without conflict. Some parents did experience resistance from their children, particularly if they tried to replicate the school environment by dictating lengthy and fixed hours of studying or attempting to force study time against a child's will. According to the parents, children were generally only able to effectively engage with learning for a few hours each day and when they were motivated to learn.

### **Impacts on Disadvantaged Pupils**

We interviewed several families whose children would qualify as disadvantaged in terms of disabilities, mental health disorders, low incomes, ethnic minorities, single parents and young parents. These families were rarely amongst those who sent their children to private schools. As such, the current failings of the state school system unequally impacted these groups. Furthermore, parents of disabled children expressed concerns about the suitability of schooling in general and low expectations for disabled children's outcomes by schools were cited. Some parents of SEND pupils [Special Educational Needs and Disabilities] were missing the support that teachers offered, but others often felt that their children thrived under the home learning environment. They valued the time and attention they could give the children as part of learning process. These parents often considered home schooling as a future possibility.

Migrated parents felt that it was difficult to support their children during home schooling due to English not being their first language. Some minority ethnic parents also cited fears of leaving the house as they were concerned with racially motivated bullying, both inside and outside of school.

Parents of children with mental health disorders were often happy that the children were not in school, since school was seen as either the cause or source of the problems. Some children who suffered from school related anxiety were hugely benefitting from being at home, with some parents feeling their learning was more productive. As the lockdowns progressed, some parents became concerned about their children's isolation from friends and companions and this was something that parents (particularly of teenagers) were keen to act upon. This even included encouraging children to break lockdown restrictions to see friends.

### **Summary**

In summary of our findings, our evidence suggests that parents and children may have a number of legitimate concerns about the capacity of schools to provide a safe, nurturing environment that is free from anxiety causing experiences such as bullying or excessive workloads. This can potentially

be attributed to an education system that is overly concerned with pressuring pupils and staff towards targets, under-resourcing schools, failing to retain teachers and defunding the arts [which by their nature may provide more creative and expressive school experiences for children, enhancing well-being].

If the Government is serious about wanting to increase attendance, then it should identify first whether non-attendance is a product of parental or pupil choice. If it is the case that non-attendance is being chosen then it may be that the alleviation of negative mental health outcomes for pupils becomes a priority. It is unlikely that this can be achieved if the adults responsible for setting the culture and atmosphere of educational settings [teachers] are themselves feeling under-resourced, under-appreciated, over-worked, stressed and seeking to leave. The 2021 Teacher Wellbeing Index identified that 77% of teachers experienced symptoms of poor mental health. If teachers are unwell and are wanting to leave a setting, then it follows that pupils may not want to attend also.

As we become more aware of children's conditions and mental ill health, it may be that we change the way in which we load expectations upon the under eighteens. Perhaps exam periods can be de-escalated from being so pressurised. Perhaps also, non-attendance can be seen less as a failing of the pupil/ parent and more as a failing of the school to generate a welcoming, nurturing and rewarding, safe environment.

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