

Attendance Matters

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO
ATTEND SCHOOL EVERY DAY



Consultation
Document



Department of
Education
www.education-ni.gov.uk



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Ministerial Foreword

We should all be concerned regarding recent trends in the level of pupil absence in schools. The percentage of pupils with 10% or more absence (e.g. this would be the same as every other Friday absent or more than 19 missed days) increased significantly in 2021/22 and whilst the position since then is slightly better, as of 30 June 2025, 82,500 pupils had 10% or more absence, this is significantly higher than in 2017/18 and 2018/19.

The aim of our Attendance Matters strategy is to support children and young people to attend school every day.

I have heard from a range of school leaders that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our children and young people, in particular, should not be underestimated. This can be seen in a variety of different ways including lack of readiness for school physically and emotionally; speech and language difficulties; inability to take turns when playing with others and so on. This has consequences at primary and post-primary level at each Key Stage, making the dual challenge of raising achievement and closing the gap ever more challenging than it was prior to the pandemic. Poor attendance at school is one symptom which draws these issues into sharp focus.

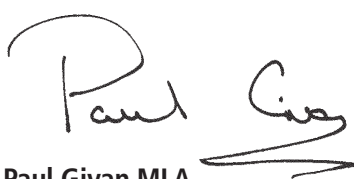
TransformED's core focus is on curriculum, assessment, school improvement, professional development and tackling educational disadvantage, and addressing pupil attendance issues will be core to the success of the programme. A pupil who is absent from school is significantly less likely to achieve.

This is why it is important that we review and refresh our approach to managing and supporting school attendance and understand the reasons for non-attendance. Whilst the fundamental principles underpinning this strategy have not changed since the "Miss School. Miss Out" strategy was published in 2016, the profile of our children has changed with significant numbers presenting with special educational needs and Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), and growing numbers of children choosing elective home education. Consequently, we have updated our attendance strategy to reflect the importance of understanding the reasons for pupil absence, highlighting the benefits of relational learning and intervening early, thereby strengthening our approach to pupil attendance. This should, over time, provide the impetus needed to build upon existing effective practice in our schools.

The key role for the Department of Education is to provide a coherent strategy for improvement and to help translate this strategy into actions for parents, schools and support services. It is essential to first understand why pupils are missing school and also the impact of non-attendance, so we can put in place effective measures to encourage regular attendance at school.

In consulting on this strategy, I want to hear directly from those with poor attendance or struggling to attend school, their families and / or schools. I would encourage you to respond to the consultation on this strategy to ensure that your views and perspectives are heard as we collectively address the issues around attendance.

Apart from it being a statutory requirement when a child is registered at school, if a child is happy in school they will feel a sense of belonging, they will feel safe and supported and they will wish to attend and not miss out. Wanting to be in school and being happy there, is the first step to thriving in education. We must demonstrate the value we place on attending school in person every day and the benefits we can gain from doing so. I want all children to see school not just as safe and secure but also as a warm, enriching and enjoyable place to be.



Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education

Executive Summary

Purpose of document

The aim of this Attendance Matters strategy is to support children and young people to attend school every day. To do this, the strategy focuses on six priority areas.

- Promoting a nurturing environment to understand and reduce Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA);
- Ensuring inclusive strategies to promote positive behaviour¹;
- Using data to identify vulnerable children and young people and delivering early interventions;
- Understanding why children are missing from formal education and taking steps to address this;
- Piloting a whole community approach to improving attendance; and
- Transforming support for schools and settings.

Attendance Matters sets out the continued importance of regular attendance at school and therefore enhancing the life chances of children and young people, particularly those who are struggling with attending school in a post pandemic world.

The document takes cognisance of the existing legislative framework, systems and policies for managing pupil attendance. We have also thought carefully about the changing profile of our children so that due consideration is given to the individual needs and circumstances of each child. The development of this strategy has been informed by research into improving school attendance including stakeholder engagement, experiences of the pandemic and reports from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) / Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

TransformED NI outlines a comprehensive strategy for the transformation of teaching and learning in Northern Ireland. The strategy focuses on the core areas of curriculum, assessment, qualifications, school improvement and tackling educational disadvantage. Reform in each of these areas will be underpinned by significant investment in high-quality teacher professional development. Addressing pupil attendance issues will be core to the success of TransformED.

Regular attendance at school is more likely if a child feels valued and has a sense of belonging in school. If these key tenets are established, children should find school motivating and interesting through delivery of an enriching curriculum and can see the benefit in attending school regularly with the support of the highly qualified educational professionals we have across all our schools.

We will achieve this in collaboration with all stakeholders by focusing on the following priorities and actions.

¹ Behaviour is often a function of communication.

Attendance Matters

Summary of Priorities and Actions

Priority 1

Nurturing, Trauma-Informed Environments to Reduce Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

- The Department of Education will continue to support the Nurture Advisory & Support Service (NASS) to promote whole-school nurturing approaches, improving educational and wellbeing outcomes.
- The Education Authority will promote the self-assessment tool and guidance for managing attendance, including EBSNA.
- The Education Authority will deliver professional learning to support schools to understand EBSNA.
- The Department of Education and Education and Training Inspectorate will share effective practices and resources.

Priority 2

Inclusive Strategies for Positive Behaviour

- Schools and Boards of Governors should review behaviour policies with input from parents and pupils, ensuring inclusivity and compliance with SENDO 2005.
- Schools must meet legal teaching day/hour requirements and minimise “reduced timetables” or “off-rolling”.

Priority 3

Data-Driven Early Interventions

- Schools must maintain accurate attendance data in SIMS/EdIS to safeguard pupils and support early intervention.
- The Department of Education will monitor data to identify at-risk learners and close attendance gaps through targeted policies and funding (e.g., FSME, SEN, Newcomer, CLA, Irish Traveller).

Priority 4

Children Missing Education

- The Department of Education, in collaboration with the Education Authority, schools and other government departments will collaborate on this issue to develop an appropriate response.

Priority 5

Whole Community Approach to Attendance

- The Department of Education will pilot attendance improvement initiatives through the RAISE Programme involving schools, families, and communities.

Priority 6

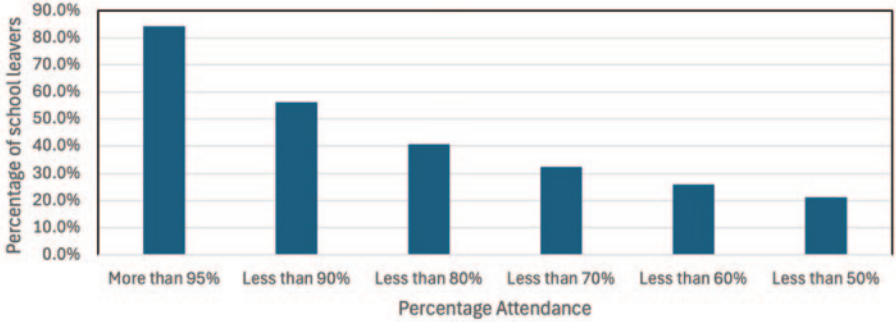
Transforming School Support

- The Education Welfare Service will provide timely, effective support and undergo transformation to enhance proactivity and transparency.
- Specialist Education Welfare Service posts will focus on prevention and early intervention.
- The Education Welfare Service will reduce referrals through proactive engagement.

The Context

Attending school regularly is important for all children and young people. There is a clear link between educational attainment and attendance. If pupil attendance is low, it is likely that educational attainment will also be low and vice versa.

Percentage of school leavers achieving at least 5 GCSEs A*–C (inc. equivalents) including English and Maths by Attendance percentage (2023–2024)



Source: School Leavers Survey 2023/24 and School Census Attendance 2023/24

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

We recognise that the context for children with special educational needs is different and attendance at school is not necessarily linked to level 2 (i.e. GCSE or equivalent) and above achievements to the same degree as with non-SEN children. The benefits for children with SEN attending school include social and physical activity opportunities, access to inclusive and safe learning environments with support and teaching which is differentiated to let all learners reach their full potential underpinned by the Northern Ireland curriculum as appropriate. The role of the SENCO in mainstream schools and the provision of pastoral care is essential in underpinning this support.

Pupil absence can be as a result of a variety of reasons and can be linked to special educational needs and/or disabilities, which are diagnosed or undiagnosed, including school anxiety and phobias often linked to emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA), or Autism, which can be combined with social, emotional, and mental health needs. It is worth noting that 50% of referrals to Exceptional Teaching Arrangements (ETA) are for children on the autistic spectrum.

New routines as a result of the pandemic

Although the majority of pupils attend school regularly, there are some who may struggle with attendance and the factors behind this are complex and varied. This has been exacerbated by issues such as the pandemic.

Management information for the 2024/25 academic year suggests that whilst attendance at school has improved significantly since 2021/22, almost 5 million days of schools were missed due to absence which equates to circa 15 days for every pupil enrolled in school.

Sector	2018/19 Absence%	Authorised	Unauthorised
Overall	5.8%	3.8%	2.1%
Primary	4.8%	3.2%	1.6%
Post-Primary	7.1%	4.5%	2.6%
Special	10.6%	6.6%	4.0%

Source: DE Annual Statistics

Sector	2024/25 Absence%	Authorised	Unauthorised
Overall	7.9%	4.4%	3.4%
Primary	6.2%	3.6%	2.7%
Post-Primary	9.4%	5.2%	4.2%
Special	12.4%	7.7%	4.7%

Source: EA School Management System

Six years ago (2018/19), the equivalent figure was 3.6 million days or circa 11 days per pupil.

School attendance is managed within the existing legislative framework and the current policies and processes. This strategy draws upon the effective practice already in existence in schools to build an overarching framework to guide the actions of all those working to support improved school attendance.



Background

Summary

Improving pupil attendance at school relies on a range of factors including:

- Increasing use of relational practice, trauma informed practice, and a “whole school” approach to nurture.
- Schools and the Education Welfare Service taking a more proactive approach to the issue by identifying early and establishing clear and simple rules for all with increasingly customised approaches as absence levels increase.
- ETI findings (from 2016 report²) still hold true to improve attendance at school:
 - Leadership
 - Close educational engagement with parents
 - Tailored education programmes
 - Strategic monitoring, reporting and evaluating
- Parents have a vital role to play in supporting this message:
 - Supporting their child’s learning and asking for help when needed
 - Where possible, avoiding medical appointments during the day
 - Not taking family holidays during term time
 - Ensuring reasons for absence are communicated quickly and clearly to school
- Community can play a vital role in supporting pupils and families to promote positive attendance.

Policy and legislative context

Policy context

The importance of attendance has been a consistent theme since November 2016 when a pupil attendance strategy was first published. Attendance Matters summarises the potential impact of non-attendance at school and supports the evidence that shows the direct link between school attendance and educational achievement³.

Whilst education achievement will always remain a priority for the Department of Education, we also recognise the other important learning opportunities provided by school for children to develop personally, socially, academically, and emotionally.

A key aim of this strategy is to understand the underlying causal factors that are leading to non-attendance and seeking to address those so that we are proactively addressing those issues, to ensure that all our children and young people regardless of their circumstances get the best possible opportunity to fulfil their potential.

Whilst a significant number of pupils attend school regularly, parents, carers and families play a vital role in supporting their children to do so. However, modern life can present unexpected challenges which many families have to overcome. The Department of Education recognises the importance of parental / family engagement and it will continue to support parents / families who find themselves in difficult circumstances where possible. Engagement with schools has highlighted many examples of effective practice in respect of managing attendance in schools and the dedication of staff within schools to supporting and encouraging regular attendance.

² <https://www.eti.gov.uk/news/attendance-schools-eti-good-practice-report-and-case-studies>

³ The positive impact regular attendance has on pupil outcomes – insights from the DfE.

The key elements of the existing system for managing attendance are as follows:

- i. The importance of attendance is communicated through published materials, promotional activities and best practice guidance for schools.
- ii. Pupil attendance is a standing item at Boards of Governors meetings.
- iii. Schools inform parents and pupils of the school's attendance policies and procedures including the roles and responsibilities of pupils and parents.
- iv. Schools record details of pupil attendance electronically and use the data to monitor and analyse attendance to take prompt appropriate action in cases of persistent poor attendance or patterns that give cause for concern. Parents / families are involved from the outset.
- v. Attendance information on a pupil is regularly provided for the parent and the parent is contacted when any issue or concern arises.
- vi. Schools proactively communicate positive news about pupils to ensure that good news as well as not so good news can be shared with parents / families.
- vii. If a school has concerns it is unable to resolve, or attendance falls to a concerning level, they should refer the pupil to the EA's Education Welfare Service (EWS).
- viii. EWS provides support for schools, pupils and parents to improve attendance at school and the EA has the legal authority to take action against a parent when required.
- ix. Unlike England and Wales, Northern Ireland does not have a fixed penalty system in place for poor attendance. The enforcement of penalties and possible court action for parents is used as a last resort, mainly when a parent fails to co-operate and no improvement in the pupil's attendance occurs.

The NIAO produced a report on improving pupil attendance in 2004⁴ and a follow-up report was published in 2014⁵. The PAC also published its own report on Improving Pupil Attendance on 11 June 2014⁶. These reports made a number of recommendations including the need for the development of a clear strategic perspective in relation to improving school attendance.

The Department commissioned research by McClure Watters⁷ into pupil attendance in socially deprived areas in 2012. The report noted that there is not one single solution to improving attendance. It also identified positive outcomes from Extended Schools funding which had provided opportunities to strengthen links with families and communities and to communicate with parents on a range of issues including attendance.

The benefit of every school developing an Attendance Policy (and a requirement of all Boards of Governors) which clearly sets out its expectations for pupils and parents was emphasised in previous reports dating back to 2012⁸. An 'Improving attendance at School' report recommended that easily accessible best practice examples and case studies should be provided to guide schools and help them to address the common issues on attendance management. These recommendations have been encompassed into this Attendance Matters strategy. Support and guidance for parents is available on NIDirect.

There are numerous examples of effective practice to improve attendance in schools which other schools can draw upon. The Department has provided guidance for schools regarding improving attendance⁹.

Legislative position

The statutory requirements which detail the days and hours when schools should be operational and pupils under instruction are set out in four sets of Regulations including Regulation 14 of 'The Primary Schools (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1973' and Regulation 11 within 'The Secondary Schools (Grant Conditions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1973'.

Schools are required to be in operation for at least 190 days and if exceptional circumstances are considered by the Department to exist, the Department may sanction a further reduction to the 190 day minimum. In recent years, the Department has sanctioned five additional system-wide closure days known as School Development

⁴ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance at School (November 2004) ⁵ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow Up Report (February 2014) ⁶ Report on Improving Pupil Attendance : Follow-Up Report – Public Accounts Committee 2014 ⁷ Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas – RSM McClure Watters 2012 ⁸ Improving Attendance at School ⁹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/challenge-improving-pupil-attendance-school-case-studies-paper-november-2018>

Days (SDDs) for the purposes of whole school improvement and development. The use of SDDs and legislation around days of operation is under review.

In addition, pupils under eight years old must be under instruction (other than in religious education) in each of those days for a minimum of three hours and those eight and over for a minimum of four and a half hours.

It is considered of critical importance that schools are open to all pupils for full days in line with the minimum requirements. In addition to the lost learning opportunities, any shortening of the normal school day or irregular closures to pupil cohorts can have unintended consequences on school attendance and other detrimental impacts on children and young people and their parents/carers. **Instances of reduced timetables outside the legislative position or unofficial “off-rolling” of children, particularly children with SEN are unacceptable.**

Attendance may be impacted by a perception that it is not worth attending for the shortened period or practical challenges in making arrangements for transport home. This is not the case, a pupil might lose access to an opportunity for a free school meal, or simply time in a safe, warm environment. A working parent may need to take time off losing income or may face additional childcare costs. **Alongside the legal position of pupil attendance, runs the critically important issue of safeguarding. If a school does not know the whereabouts of a pupil, there may be a risk to the safeguarding of that pupil.**

Parents have a statutory duty, as set out in Article 45 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986¹⁰ (1986 order), to ensure that each child of compulsory school age receives full time education either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. **If a parent registers their child in a school, they have a legal duty under the 1986 order to ensure they attend school regularly.**

Schools have a duty, as set out in the Registration and Attendance of Pupils Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1974¹¹, to keep details of their pupils’ attendance and have arrangements in place to address attendance issues. The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010¹² state that schools should include strategies for promoting attendance in the School Development Plan.

Under Schedule 13 of the 1986 Order, if a child or young person who is registered at a school does not attend regularly, the Education Authority (EA) can initiate court action which could result in the parent receiving a fine not exceeding £1,000 for each child. The EA can also apply under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 for an Education Supervision Order¹³ to be made by the court.

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland has historically stopped short of levying a fixed penalty on parents whose child does not attend school regularly as it believed that working in collaboration with parents and families to resolve the issues is preferable to imposing sanctions.

Parents can raise a complaint with the Board of Governors of a school in instances where they have reason to believe that full-time education is not being provided.

Education and Training Inspectorate

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) developed an effective practice guide in 2016, based upon examples of best practice in schools and are available here –

Part One: [part-one-attendance-in-schools-eti-good-practice-report.pdf](https://eani.org.uk/part-one-attendance-in-schools-eti-good-practice-report.pdf) (eani.org.uk); and

Part Two: [Attendance in Schools - Case Studies | Education Training Inspectorate](https://etini.gov.uk/attendance-in-schools-case-studies) (etini.gov.uk)

Within this, four central elements were outlined that improved attendance and higher standards. These were:

- **Leadership:** means taking responsibility for prioritising good attendance and building a culture which connects attendance and attainment¹⁴ in the minds of staff, pupils and parents. A key characteristic is a defined role for a senior member of staff, sometimes a specific post of responsibility, to take the lead and link with the local community, parents, local social agencies and businesses. In successful case studies, the governors take an active part in constructing the school attendance policy and strategies, holding those who take the lead to account and monitoring the impact.

¹⁰ The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (legislation.gov.uk) ¹¹ nisir_19740078_en.pdf (legislation.gov.uk) ¹² Annex A - School Development Plans Regulations 2010 (education-ni.gov.uk) ¹³ The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (legislation.gov.uk) ¹⁴ Bearing in mind this report was produced in 2016, the ETI’s and the Department’s position on attendance has changed since Covid to one where understanding the underlying causes for absence is an important part of reducing pupil absence.

- **Close educational engagement with parents:** seeks to raise awareness of the intrinsic link between attendance and attainment, and especially the importance of building habits of good attendance from the earliest years, both in early years settings and in primary schooling. Inspection work by ETI in early years settings affirms the importance of pre-school and nursery providers placing an emphasis on establishing good habits of attendance from the outset.
- **Tailored education programmes:** refers to the need to ensure that young people experience the curriculum and teaching as relevant to their needs, interests and learning styles as well as addressing the barriers which they may experience as individuals. Mentoring young people is cited by successful schools as a key driver in raising attendance and attainment by reminding them of the intrinsic value of learning¹⁵.
- **Strategic monitoring, reporting and evaluating:** refers to a clear strategy for closely monitoring relevant data and evaluating and reporting on the effectiveness of actions taken to promote improvement. In these case studies, evidence is collected systematically; data on attendance is recorded accurately and is linked to progress and attainment. For example, in terms of qualitative data the measurement of the impact of mentoring with the most vulnerable learners is a key feature of the most effective practice.

Furthermore, three effective actions were identified which need to be taken when low attendance is evident.

- **Prompt and direct contact with individual parents:** in the effective case studies, schools take action on the first day of absence and do not wait until absence drops to formal trigger points. The personal contact with parents works best because it establishes that the school knows the learner as an individual and can guide the family or carer to appropriate support, if necessary.
- **Early intervention of external support:** early engagement with external services initiates early intervention and provides bespoke support as soon as poor attendance shows signs of becoming an established pattern.
- **Rewarding attendance and sanctions:** recognising good attendance, both explicitly with the use of extrinsic rewards (prizes, recognition and so on) alongside highlighting the intrinsic motivation of success, is used along with being equally clear with parents and carers about the sanctions available for absence^{16/17}.

Data and trends

Prior to the pandemic, annual statistics tended to show that the overall attendance rate did not change significantly from year to year and was like that of other jurisdictions. However, since schools returned to normal operation in 2021/22 we have seen very concerning levels of absence from school. This is the case in all school sectors with special schools facing particular challenges. Since the pandemic, some of the additional factors include a changing profile of children with a wider range and depth of needs, the increase in emotional health and wellbeing needs and changing attitudes to regular attendance at schools amongst adults.

In 2017/18, 49,000 pupils had 10%+ absence, by 2024/25, this had increased to 82,500 pupils, a 68% increase. This suggests that attitudes towards regular attendance have changed since the disruption caused by the pandemic and periods of lockdown and remote learning. This has been compounded by increasing challenges regarding mental health, such as EBSNA. The Department now receives data from the EA on those half day sessions recorded as EBSNA and as a result can monitor trends.

Using attendance data provided by schools, in the 2021/22 academic year (post-pandemic) we saw a fall in attendance rates of circa four to five percentage points when compared with 2018/19 academic year (pre pandemic). We cannot be certain of the reasons for this but there appears to be a number of factors at play including emotional health and wellbeing concerns, less socialisation between children and young people as a result of lockdowns, the impact of social media, the increasing number of children with SEN along with the level of complexity, austerity and on-going financial pressures felt by families.

¹⁵ ETI would recommend asking what impact the curriculum, the learning experiences and preparing for examinations are having on children and young people's commitment to school? ¹⁶ These factors provide a useful way in which DE / schools / EWS could monitor improvements in attendance over time. ¹⁷ Due cognisance also needs to be given to children for whom getting to school can be a significant achievement, particularly for children with unmet needs.

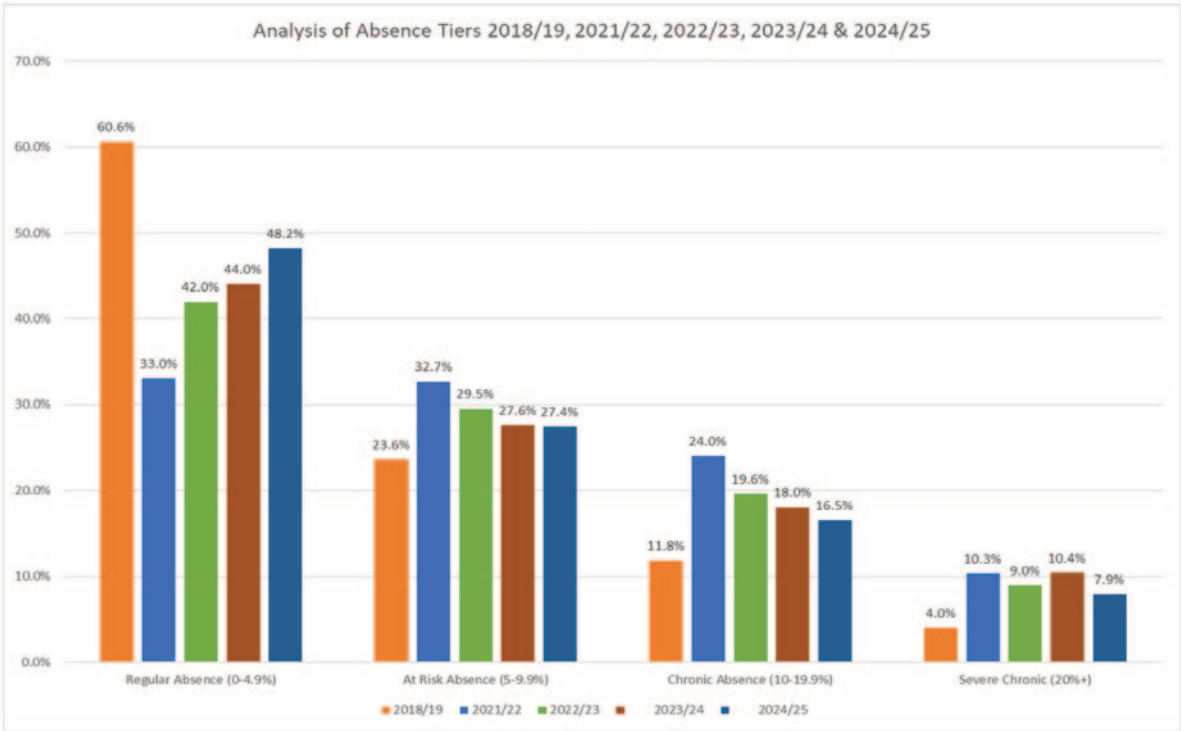
Comparison of data with other UK jurisdictions for the 2023/24 academic year reveals that many countries / jurisdictions are facing similar challenges regarding regular attendance at school.

Absence rates for Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, 2023/24 % of total half days

	Primary Schools		Post-Primary Schools	
	Overall absence	Persistent absence	Overall absence	Persistent absence
Northern Ireland	6.7	19.7	10.1	32.1
England	5.3	14.7	8.5	23.9
Scotland	7.5	23.9	12.4	40.6
Wales	7.9	24.7	12.0	37.1

In September 2022, following concerns about the level of pupil absence that we were seeing in the 2021/22 academic year, DE introduced new guidance for schools using Absence Tiers.

In 2024/25, the number of pupils with Chronic or Severe Chronic absence was 82,500. This is 16,000 fewer pupils than at the same time in the previous academic year.

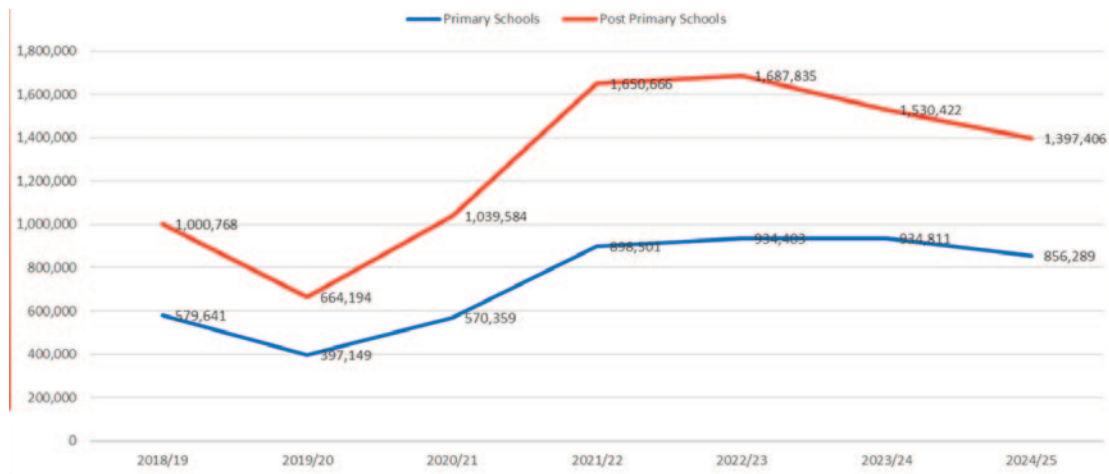


Source – Management Information SIMS Data

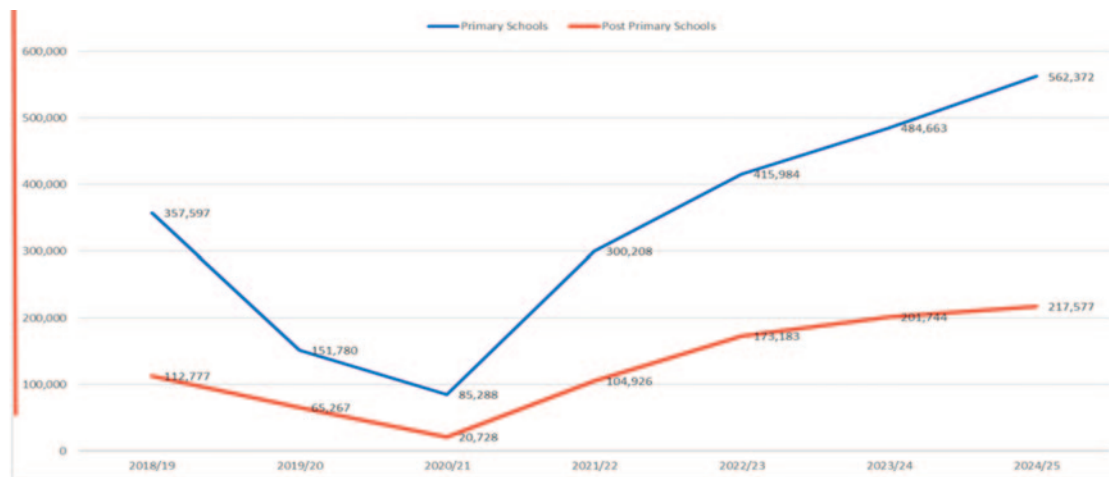
The main authorised reason for absence in any given year is “Illness” and the main unauthorised reason for absence is “No reason provided” followed by Family Holiday (not agreed). If we focus on the unauthorised reasons, the graphs below illustrate the increased use of these absence codes over the past 5 years. As the descriptions suggest:

- “No Reason provided” is where no explanation has been given for a pupil being absent.
- “Family Holiday not agreed” is where a pupil is absent due to family holiday and the absence has not been approved by the school.

No reason provided to the school (No of 1/2 days sessions missed)



Family holiday not agreed with school (No of 1/2 day sessions missed)



Source – Management Information SIMS Data

Approaches in other jurisdictions

The challenges surrounding school attendance are not unique to Northern Ireland. The pandemic has also had a significant bearing on attendance at school in the vast majority of countries across the world and all countries are taking steps to enable children and young people to attend school regularly. The Department of Education must therefore consider approaches in other countries both in school and outside school to better understand what interventions may or may not be appropriate in Northern Ireland.

Research into other jurisdictions confirmed broadly similar policies in respect of attendance. Attendance policies in England¹⁸, Scotland¹⁹, Wales²⁰, USA²¹, Canada²² and New Zealand^{23/24}, emphasise the central and key role of the parent in securing their child's regular attendance at school. Each country ensures that schools and local authorities have attendance policies and support mechanisms in place both to assist parents and to understand influences upon attendance emanating from both the school and the external environment.

Schools and local authorities are assisted through the provision of non-statutory guidance from central government on what constitutes an effective attendance policy. The guidance provides the basis for schools to develop and tailor their attendance policies to their specific circumstances. The enforcement of penalties upon parents is used as the last resort mostly in circumstances where a parent fails to co-operate.

¹⁸ Working together to improve school attendance (publishing.service.gov.uk) ¹⁹ Supporting attendance and managing absence - Included, engaged and involved part 1: promoting and managing school attendance - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) ²⁰ School attendance and absence | Sub-topic | GOV.WALES ²¹ Home - Attendance Works ²² Chronic student absenteeism will take serious investment (irpp.org) ²³ Attendance | Education Counts ²⁴ Attendance action plan to lift student attendance rates | Beehive.govt.nz

Roles and Responsibilities

Everyone has a role to play in promoting attendance at school. We must be mindful of the wider players (and factors) that can support improved school attendance, namely parents, families, friends, peers and community influences. Some of the additional supports mentioned below are subject to the availability of resources.

School Principal / School Leadership Team

The TransformED NI strategy, encourages highly trained senior leaders to play a pivotal role in using data to drive educational transformation across Northern Ireland. "School principals determine the level of priority given to school attendance."²⁵ Schools that are effective in managing pupil attendance tend to be led by principals and Senior Leadership Team committed to promoting and prioritising attendance within their schools. Schools with effective attendance management will have targets in respect of attendance in their school development plan which is discussed as a standing agenda item by the BoG. In the experience of ETI, schools are being resourceful and are committed to prioritising addressing low attendance. However, they need assistance and support to increase the impact.

Commitment from school leadership allows the creation of a school ethos and culture that values the importance of a whole school approach to nurture and its links to attendance and attainment. Staff must be clear about how these aspects interlink, what is expected of them and every opportunity should be taken to communicate the importance of attendance to pupils and parents.

Using attendance data, leaders must be proactive in implementing appropriate strategies throughout their school community to address attendance issues. This will be tailored to the school circumstances but might include extra support for those struggling with regular attendance such as adjustments and tailoring or enriching the curriculum, personal education plans or homework clubs.

Boards of Governors

As set out in the Governors' Guide (Guide to governor roles and responsibilities | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)), the BoG of a school must provide challenge, direction and support to the Principal in respect of pupil attendance, who in turn will communicate the commitment to meeting attendance targets to staff, parents and pupils regularly.

The type of reports which are available within SIMS / EdIS can be found in the Documentation Centre on C2k Exchange.

School Staff

School staff play an essential role in promoting the importance of regular attendance at school to pupils and parents and in translating both what the policy means and the impact on learning and social skills etc if a pupil is not attending regularly. They should also undertake professional learning and development in things like Adverse Childhood Experiences, Trauma Informed Practice, Relational Learning and Restorative Practice.

School Secretary and School Office Staff

These staff play a key role in attendance, being informed of all relevant guidance, ensuring that timely, accurate attendance reports are available on SIMS to creating a culture of attendance by interacting in a positive manner with students and their families.

Nurture Provision Staff

Staff with responsibility for a 'Nurturing School' through a whole school nurturing approach, have a role in promoting the principles of Nurture and a trauma informed approach. This is supported by the Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS).

²⁵ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow Up Report (February 2014)

There are four assumptions which should underpin all trauma informed education delivery. These assumptions are commonly referred to as the four 'R's. An education setting that is trauma-informed realises the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognises the signs and symptoms of trauma in our children and young people; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and; seeks to actively resist re-traumatising our children and young people²⁶.

Attendance Staff

Typically charged with ensuring compliance with attendance policy, these individuals can work with the school Principal and other staff to promote and organise a more comprehensive approach to improving attendance that begins with prevention and only proceeds to the courts as a last resort, following a referral to EWS.

School Counsellor

Counsellors can help work with students and families with a prior or emerging pattern of chronic absence to unpack barriers to attendance and develop plans for overcoming them. They can also help schools create a more engaging and positive school climate that motivates students to show up to class every day.

School Nurse

If your school has a medically qualified nurse, they can help families assess if a student is well enough to attend class or stay home due to illness, help manage chronic health issues such as asthma, can provide access to services, and encourage families to avoid missing school for medical appointments. Adopting a whole school nurture approach could mean that a school nurse is not needed.

Social Worker / Home-School Liaison Officer

A number of schools have employed social workers directly as a member of the school staff team. If your school has a Social Worker or Home-School Liaison Officer, they can help identify barriers to attendance faced by students and families and help them access a wide variety of family supports including food, clothing, transportation and medical care.

Education Welfare Service

In Northern Ireland, attendance at school is supported through a dedicated service provided by the Education Authority's Education Welfare Service (EWS)²⁷.

The EWS is a specialist education support service which seeks to help young people and their families get the best out of the education system by ensuring that they receive the support they need to attend school regularly. EWS engages largely with vulnerable children with multiple needs and in doing so, the service works in partnership with the young people, their families, the schools, other education services as well as other statutory and voluntary agencies. Increasingly, EWS have moved to a more proactive approach in line with the Transformation report conducted in 2022²⁸.

Families, parents, carers

Families, parents and carers who have a legal responsibility must support the importance of regular attendance at school by doing the following:

- Seek help or advice when dealing with ongoing physical or mental health issues.
- establishing a routine from an early age and sticking to that routine for as long as possible.
- ensuring their child gets enough sleep at night (typically 12 hours sleep for young children).
- when possible, provide nutritious food and drink before school.
- ensuring a quiet place to study.
- keeping digital devices out of children's bedroom at night.
- reading to your child at bedtime
- joining a library.
- not taking term time holidays.

²⁶ (Reference: SAMHSA's (2014) Six Principles of Trauma informed Care referenced in Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland: ACEs Report 2019 'Developing trauma informed practice in Northern Ireland: Key messages' Queen's University Belfast, School of Social Sciences <https://www.safeguardingni.org/resources/aces-report-a4-feb-2019-key-messages> ²⁷ EWS employs social workers who have a detailed knowledge of education and can support children and young people and their families facing multiple challenges. ²⁸ Public Consultation on EA's Education Welfare Transformation Project Report | Education Authority Northern Ireland (eani.org.uk)

Children and young people

Children and young people can help by gaining an understanding of why regular attendance is important, complying with school rules, contributing to school life, recognising the benefits of education and learning, talking to a trusted adult if they have any worries or concerns. Playing a role in designing the solutions, e.g. Improving Pupil Attendance – HERO Initiative | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)

The wider community

Community partners are external organisations that are able to provide programmes or services that expand and complement pupils' learning and engagement opportunities. Schools should work with partners who can support the building of relationships and engage with pupils and families in identifying and addressing attendance barriers.

The Department's new RAISE programme which is a locality-based programme in 18 localities across Northern Ireland, provides the opportunity for schools to partner with local organisations to help schools put in place relevant programmes and supports for pupils and families.



Attendance Matters

Priorities And Actions

The purpose of this section of the strategy is to set out the actions that we think will help to improve pupil attendance at school but this will require concerted effort on everyone's part – children and young people, parents, families, communities, schools, voluntary and community sector, businesses, members of the public and so on.

Priority 1:

Nurturing, Trauma-Informed Environments to Reduce Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

- The Department of Education will continue to support the Nurture Advisory and Support Service (NASS) to promote whole-school nurturing approaches, improving educational and wellbeing outcomes.
- The Education Authority will promote a new self-assessment tool and guidance for managing attendance, including EBSNA.
- The Education Authority will deliver professional learning to support schools to understand EBSNA.
- The Department of Education and Education and Training Inspectorate will share effective practices and resources.

There has been an increase in the number of children who feel unable to attend school. Research estimates it impacts 1-5% of the school population²⁹. Young people's anxiety associated with attending school can range from mild to severe, with some students able to attend school but unable to complete work, while others cannot attend school at all and exhibit signs of severe distress.

In this context, it is essential that we promote a nurturing, trauma informed school environment that supports regular attendance and provides support for those struggling with attendance.

Youth focus groups have identified mental health as one of their most predominant concerns and an engagement report provided by the EA Youth Services Team confirmed UK mental health statistics indicate 10% of the school population struggle with mental health problems. The Youth Wellbeing Survey 2020 details the particular issues identified in Northern Ireland. It is therefore likely that in a typical classroom there will be pupils dealing with serious psychosocial stressors relating to "poverty, domestic violence, abuse or neglect, trauma or a psychiatric disorder" and are therefore more likely to present behaviours leading to suspension/expulsion, which will also impact on attendance more generally.

EBSNA is a term describing children and young people who have reduced or non-attendance at school as a result of emotional, mental health or wellbeing issues³⁰. EBSNA is a complex issue and some examples of EBSNA risk factors could include:

- Anxiety, depression or other mental health concerns;
- Trauma;
- Being a young carer;
- Bullying;
- Having a special educational need or disability.

²⁹ Pellegrini, 2007; Elliott & Place, 2019 ³⁰Source: Anna Freud - Addressing emotionally-based school avoidance : Mentally Healthy Schools

Children who feel unable to go to school differs from other attendance problems, such as truancy and school withdrawal. Some of the key differences include:

- students not hiding their reluctance to attend school;
- parents being aware of their child's absence from school;
- parents having made multiple attempts to address their child's non-attendance; and
- an absence of antisocial behaviour³¹.

The Anna Freud resource "School attendance and mental well-being" explores the risk factors for EBSNA and looks at universal and targeted approaches that school staff can take to tackle the issue in their setting.

The Education Authority lead on the Being Well Doing Well programme, funded under the joint DE/DoH Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework. The programme helps to assist all schools to develop a whole school approach to emotional health and wellbeing. It provides schools with a framework to assess current policy and practice, and implement actions to develop and improve.

Nurture Groups offer a short term, focused, early intervention strategy, which addresses barriers to learning arising primarily from social, behavioural, emotional or wellbeing difficulties, in an inclusive and supportive manner. Nurture Provision is a wider concept that includes Nurture Groups and the whole school approach. Central to the philosophy of nurture is the theory of attachment, and the need for a child to be able to form secure and happy relationships with others in the formative years of their lives. This in turn supports regular attendance at schools and can in turn support attainment for many.

Commitment from school leadership allows the creation of a school ethos and culture that values the importance of nurture to develop a positive school culture.

Furthermore, school attendance should be considered when developing school plans and attendance should be discussed by the Board of Governors. In the context of a whole school nurture approach, school leaders should promote school attendance policies and be proactive in implementing appropriate strategies to address attendance issues. This should be tailored to the school circumstances.



³¹ Chapter 2 - School refusal in Australia – Parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au)

Priority 2:

Inclusive Strategies to Promote Positive Behaviour

- Schools and Board of Governors should review their behaviour policies and other related policies, in consultation with parents and pupils, to ensure that they are child centred and focused on the inclusion of children and young people, with particular reference to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. The voice of the child and the parent is central to this.
- Schools must ensure compliance with the law in terms of the number of teaching days provided to pupils each year and the number of hours teaching per day and ensure that “off-rolling” or reduced timetables are kept to an absolute minimum and can be fully justified when they are used. The legal requirements for schools can be found at Circular 2024 12 - school optional days & exceptional closure 2024.pdf

Departmental guidance relating to behaviour requires that schools have a policy in place which promotes positive behaviour among pupils to safeguard their welfare and facilitate their educational progress at school. Guidance is available on the DE website. This outlines some of the strategies and procedures for promoting positive behaviour that are available to schools to enable them to manage behaviour within their own resources.

These strategies reflect the importance of early interventions in tackling emerging patterns of concern and schools are encouraged to consider and make full use of the range of strategies open to them, including trauma informed practice and where appropriate, use of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

The Board of Governors/BoG of each school should:

- ensure that the school has policies about the promotion of good behaviour and discipline and the use of reasonable force with staff kept up to date with the guidance and any appropriate training in positive behaviour and de escalation techniques to avoid crisis situations occurring.
- have a written statement of ‘general principles’ about pupil behaviour and discipline, which is reviewed regularly with input from pupils and parents.
- ensure that the school has legislatively required appropriate procedures for dealing with the issue of bullying type behaviour and complaints about bullying.
- ensure that the school has a scheme operating in the school for the suspension and expulsion of pupils in accordance with legal requirements, including those linked to pupils with Special Educational Needs and equality of treatment.

Concerns have been raised in relation to pupils with special educational needs being suspended or expelled in cases where their behavioural presentation is an outworking of a SEN and/or learning disability.

Data on pupil suspensions and expulsions is provided annually to the Department by the EA from all schools and is analysed before being published on DE’s website³².

The figures presented in Pupil Suspensions and Expulsions in Northern Ireland 2023/24: Official Statistics in Development | Department of Education show that 1.8% of pupils of statutory school age in Northern Ireland were suspended with the rate for boys (2.5%) over twice the rate for girls (1.0%) This may be an indicator of unmet needs of boys in learning, emotional wellbeing, trauma, and societal approaches that differ between females and males, and may be linked to how this is addressed in individual schools within their positive behaviour policies. Engagement with young people has suggested boys are perceived to be more harshly disciplined than girls.

Comparisons across the UK for the most recent academic year (2022/23) for which data are available for all four nations of the UK, show that in both England (9.3% of all pupils) and Wales (6.2% of all pupils) the rate of pupil suspensions was higher than in Northern Ireland (1.7% of pupils of statutory school age) and the rate in Scotland was the same (1.7% of all pupils). Interestingly the higher level of suspensions in England is in the context of lower absence rates overall as set out in the table above.

³² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/suspensions-and-expulsions-finance>

It is important to emphasise that schools should not be contravening their legal requirements and using measures such as reducing a pupil's timetable or suspending / expelling them without going through the correct process or suspending pupils for more than the maximum periods set out in legislation.

All schools have a statutory responsibility within their scheme of management (Articles 3-6 of The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998³³) for developing their own policies to promote good behaviour and discipline for pupils attending the school.

When a pupil, despite support and intervention by school staff and other agencies, fails to meet the required standards of positive behaviour, the school is entitled to employ appropriate strategies and sanctions in line with its written policy, which may escalate to a sanction of suspension or expulsion. That policy, and the sanctions which the school may employ, must be made known from the outset of a pupil's placement in a school to both pupils and parents, and include consultation with pupils and parents when making or revising the school policy.

In addition, there are statutory requirements with regard to disability discrimination which are set out in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005³⁴ in carrying out suspension and expulsion procedures. School authorities are expected to adhere to this order which states under Article 14(3) of SENDO: "It is unlawful for the body responsible for a school to discriminate against a disabled pupil by suspending or expelling him from the school", unless it is justified to do so (Articles 15 & 16 of SENDO refer).

Schools must not send a pupil out of school during the school day due to behavioural issues without recording this as a suspension, nor may schools reduce the minimum hours under instruction for any pupil, as set out in the Primary Schools (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1973 and the Secondary Schools (Grant Conditions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1973, without following the procedures for applying temporary exceptions in accordance with Circular 1990/45³⁵.

Schools experiencing difficulties in the management of more complex behaviour may request support from:

- Post Primary Behaviour Support & Provisions Service | SEND Plan (eani.org.uk);
- Primary Children Looked After Advisory Service | Education Authority Northern Ireland (eani.org.uk)
- Being Well Doing Well Programme | Education Authority Northern Ireland (eani.org.uk)
- REACH Programme | Education Authority Northern Ireland (eani.org.uk)
- RISE Parent Homepage

Promoting positive behaviour in the school is central to creating a climate which fosters effective learning, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of pupils when they are at school and promoting safe travel to and from school.

The Board of Governors of every school has a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of registered pupils at the school when the pupils are on school premises or in the lawful control or charge of a member of school staff. The Board of Governors and the Principal are also responsible for ensuring that the school has behaviour policies which promote positive behaviour.

The Board of Governors of every school must make, and keep under review, a written statement of 'general principles' about positive pupil behaviour, which the Principal will have regard to in determining school rules and behaviour policies.

Before making or when reviewing its statement, the Board of Governors must consult the Principal, the registered pupils at the school and their parents and ensure there is a parent friendly version of the statement and any related school policies. It must also consider any guidance given by the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA).

The Principal is responsible for determining measures which the school will take to:

- promote self-discipline and proper regard for authority among pupils.
- encourage good behaviour, respect for others and prevent all forms of bullying among pupils.
- secure an acceptable standard of pupil behaviour.
- regulate the conduct of pupils.

In doing so, the Principal should act in accordance with all legal requirements as well as with the Board of Governors' statement of general principles and any other guidance provided.

³³ Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (legislation.gov.uk) ³⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/2005/1117/contents> ³⁵ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-11/Circular%201990%2045%20-%20Amended.pdf>

Priority 3:

Using data to identify vulnerable Children and Young People and deliver early interventions.

- Schools should ensure that attendance data held on SIMS / EdIS is as complete, accurate and up to date as possible to ensure the safeguarding of pupils and to ensure that proactive steps are taken to support pupils who may be absent.
- The Department of Education will monitor attendance data provided by schools and identify cohorts of learners at greatest risk of low attendance³⁶.
- The Department of Education will seek to close the attendance gap amongst learners vulnerable to exclusion and their peers, through policy / service delivery interventions.
- The Department of Education will support schools through existing funding streams such as the Common Funding Formula, Targeting Social Need, Extended Schools Programme, etc to support pupils who are Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME), Special Educational Needs, Newcomer, Children Looked After or Irish Traveller to attend school regularly through the identification and promotion of effective practice.

This strategy outlines a universal approach - attendance is important for every pupil, as non-attendance has been attributed to potentially increasing the risk of anti-social behaviour, criminality and exploitation³⁷.

There are also a number of policies and interventions in place to support children and young people struggling with other issues which might impact upon attendance such as emotional health and wellbeing or bullying.

The joint Department of Education and Department of Health's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework³⁸ provides guidelines for school to help them promote emotional wellbeing and strengthen self-esteem and resilience, along with a range of services for children and young people. Further information can be found on the Department's website (Emotional Health and Wellbeing | Department of Education).

Another group of children are those whose parents are struggling with their own emotional health and wellbeing, including those with addiction problems. Those parents are often not able to ensure that their children are attending regularly and punctually. The Department has a range of programmes in place to support parents / families overcome these challenges however the level of need across Northern Ireland is thought to be significant.

Attendance and Absence by Ethnicity / FSME / Neighbourhood Renewal Area / Children Looked After / SEN Statement 2023/24

Category	% Attendance	% Absence
Irish Traveller	68.8	31.2
FSME	87.7	12.3
Living in NRA	87.9	12.1
Children looked after	89.1	10.9
SEN Statement	87.3	12.7
NI Average	91.7	8.3

³⁶ We acknowledge that attendance data alone does not enable early signs of EBSNA to be captured ³⁷ Purdy, N (2021) Loyalist and Republican Perspectives on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland - Stranmillis University College | A College of Queen's University Belfast. The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk) Microsoft Word - Gangs_PDFVersion.doc (ed.ac.uk) ³⁸ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/emotional-health-and-wellbeing#toc-0>

Furthermore, data shows that there are links between social deprivation and school attendance. Overall absence levels increase in line with the percentage of pupils enrolled who are entitled to free school meals. The data below gives a summary of the levels of attendance and absence for Primary, Post-Primary and Special School settings, broken down into Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME) bands.

Pupil Absence Data by Free School Meal Bands - September 2024 to June 2025											
Primary Schools - September 2024 to June 2025 (Cumulative)											
FSM Band	% Present	% Absent	% Authorised Absence	% Unauthorised Absence	Absence Tiers						
					Authorised as % of Total Absence	Unauthorised as % of Total Absence	% Regular	% At Risk	% Chronic	% Severe Chronic	
0.00 - 9.99	95.5%	4.5%	2.9%	1.7%	63.6%	36.4%	65.7%	24.4%	8.1%	1.9%	
10.00 - 19.99	94.7%	5.3%	3.3%	2.0%	61.5%	38.5%	58.3%	27.0%	11.9%	2.8%	
20.00 - 29.99	93.5%	6.5%	3.7%	2.9%	56.2%	43.8%	51.5%	29.2%	14.6%	4.7%	
30.00 - 39.99	91.6%	8.4%	4.2%	4.3%	49.6%	50.4%	41.7%	29.5%	19.9%	8.9%	
40.00 - 49.99	90.8%	9.2%	4.3%	4.8%	47.2%	52.8%	38.5%	28.3%	23.0%	10.2%	
50.00 - 59.99	90.7%	9.3%	4.7%	4.7%	50.0%	50.0%	35.7%	28.9%	24.2%	11.2%	
60+	89.7%	10.3%	5.3%	5.0%	51.3%	48.7%	31.6%	29.8%	25.9%	12.7%	
Total	93.7%	6.3%	3.6%	2.8%	56.3%	43.7%	53.5%	27.4%	14.3%	4.9%	
Post Primary - September 2024 to June 2025 (Cumulative)											
FSM Band	% Present	% Absent	% Authorised Absence	% Unauthorised Absence	Absence Tiers						
					Authorised as % of Total Absence	Unauthorised as % of Total Absence	% Regular	% At Risk	% Chronic	% Severe Chronic	
0.00 - 9.99	94.0%	6.0%	4.1%	1.9%	68.5%	31.5%	58.0%	26.7%	11.4%	4.0%	
10.00 - 19.99	91.8%	8.2%	4.6%	3.6%	56.1%	43.9%	43.7%	31.0%	18.1%	7.1%	
20.00 - 29.99	89.3%	10.7%	5.5%	5.2%	51.8%	48.2%	35.3%	29.0%	23.0%	12.7%	
30.00 - 39.99	87.2%	12.8%	6.5%	6.2%	51.2%	48.8%	31.1%	26.2%	24.9%	17.7%	
40.00 - 49.99	87.3%	12.7%	6.6%	6.1%	52.0%	48.0%	34.7%	24.0%	22.9%	18.4%	
50.00+	84.6%	15.4%	6.6%	8.8%	43.1%	56.9%	25.2%	23.8%	25.8%	25.1%	
Total	90.5%	9.5%	5.2%	4.3%	54.8%	45.2%	42.4%	27.7%	19.1%	10.9%	
Special Schools - September 2024 to June 2025 (Cumulative)											
FSM Band	% Present	% Absent	% Authorised Absence	% Unauthorised Absence	Absence Tiers						
					Authorised as % of Total Absence	Unauthorised as % of Total Absence	% Regular	% At Risk	% Chronic	% Severe Chronic	
0.00 - 39.99	87.8%	12.2%	7.8%	4.5%	63.5%	36.5%	32.7%	28.4%	21.9%	17.0%	
40.00+	87.4%	12.6%	7.6%	4.9%	60.6%	39.4%	34.2%	26.3%	22.6%	16.9%	
Total	87.6%	12.4%	7.7%	4.7%	61.9%	38.1%	33.5%	27.3%	22.2%	16.9%	

Source: DE SIMS

For these learners, more must be done to understand the cause of poor attendance rates and the consequences with interventions in place to close the attendance gap.

Priority 4:
Addressing Children missing education

- Subject to the necessary resources being made available, the Department of Education, in collaboration with the Education Authority, schools and other government departments will collaborate on this issue to develop an appropriate response³⁹.

The issue of children missing formal education is complex and cross cutting. Children missing education (CME) are children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll and are not receiving education in any other setting (such as home education or private school). Work is underway within the Department to develop this policy area.

³⁹ This may include pupils in special schools with an acute behaviour profile.

Priority 5:

Whole community approach to improving attendance

- The Department of Education will pilot attendance improvement initiatives through the RAISE Programme involving schools, families, and communities.

We know that improving educational outcomes requires collaboration between schools, parents, families, communities etc. It is vital that parents are involved at all times in their child's education to provide encouragement and support from an early age and to establish positive attitudes to attending school. We must consider taking a wider community approach to improving school attendance.

For instance, strong, honest, and trusting partnerships between schools and parents/carers are fundamental to ensure that the school is kept aware of any issues facing a pupil and their family which may have a negative impact on their school day. For example, ill health and/or bereavement of a family member or friend; drug or alcohol abuse; domestic violence; breakdown in family relationships; community issues; anxiety; exam stress; or breakdown in a foster placement.

Engagement with parents should form an important element of every school's attendance policy and procedures.

Schools are not expected to resolve family issues but can provide support by signposting parents and children, if appropriate, to relevant agencies. Early awareness, understanding, support and intervention will help the pupil before they communicate their worries through challenging behaviour which could escalate to suspension or expulsion.

At a strategic/system level, government departments and agencies should work together to promote the importance of regular attendance at school, so that when individuals (parents/carers and pupils) engage with services, such as health, justice, local government or social care, a consistent message on school attendance is understood and shared. This cross-sectoral collaboration can also help us to engage with local communities to ensure that the value of education and regular school attendance is understood and championed within those communities.

The RAISE programme will support a whole community and place-based approach in some disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland where the programme is delivered. This aligns with the Fair Start's advocacy of addressing educational underachievement by "placing equality of opportunity at the core of everything we do". The launch of this programme and its investment in place-based approaches will be a major contribution to the mission to ensure all children and young people regardless of background are given the best start in life.

There are opportunities within RAISE to work with schools, families and communities to deliver bespoke interventions that improve attendance at school and wider educational outcomes. These interventions, once evaluated, could inform wider policy / service delivery decisions.

Priority 6:

Transforming support for schools and settings

- The Education Welfare Service (EWS) will provide timely, effective support to children and young people, families and the schools / alternative settings they attend.
- The EWS will undergo transformation to ensure that the service is able to evidence its impact by being more proactive in its approach and reporting more transparently.
- The EWS will introduce a number of specialist posts across Northern Ireland to organise and deliver preventative activities and early interventions which will mean it is able to respond more effectively to pupils' needs.
- The number of referrals to EWS will be reduced as a result of proactive work by EWS.

The EWS is the key operational support mechanism for schools and settings. However, it is a matter of public record that there are concerns regarding how effective the service has been in reducing absences and action to address these concerns has been ongoing⁴⁰.

The EWS has been subject to a fundamental review, resulting in a Transformation Report agreed by the Education Authority and the Department of Education in 2023. The key elements of the EWS Transformation Review are a move to early intervention and the development of specialisms within the service with a focus on what works and evidence based practice. The service historically has been skewed towards a mostly reactive, intensive case work intervention service based on declining levels of attendance that often occurs too late for significant positive outcomes for the young people it is intended to help.

Given the central importance of school attendance it is vital that there is transformed and effective service available for all schools to support our most vulnerable learners, advise our schools on effective interventions and promote a culture of inclusion, early intervention and evidence based practice.

A transformed service is required to both support those young people experiencing personal difficulties with attendance whilst also focussing on the delivery of a universal and system-wide response to removing systemic barriers to attendance.



⁴⁰https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/media-files/niao_pupils_attendance.pdf

Indicators of Effective Performance

We must also consider the indicators of effective performance associated with each of the key features of successfully managing attendance.

Schools should use the associated Self Evaluation Framework (Attendance Matters - Practical guidance to improve attendance together | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)) developed by the EA to measure their performance in each of these areas. The on-going End to End Review of School Improvement within DE may also influence the following.

EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE	WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?	MEASURES OF SUCCESS
Leadership committed to prioritising attendance in the interests of pupils	<p>Tenacious commitment, led at the highest level within school.</p> <p>Cultivating a School Wide Culture of a nurturing approach which supports and improves attendance and involves all staff.</p> <p>Embedding a culture of proactive management of attendance through data and interventions.</p> <p>Developing staff capacity to adopt effective attendance practices.</p> <p>Communicating of vision to parents and pupils, about learning and a clear understanding of the roles of all.</p> <p>Promoting the connection between nurture, attendance and attainment widely and at every opportunity.</p>	<p>Increasing the number / % of schools who have undertaken Nurture in Education Programme training.</p> <p>Increasing high levels of attendance.</p> <p>Increasing the number / % of pupils attending Nurture Groups showing improved attendance and other broader outcomes.</p> <p>Increasing use of the Boxall Profile in Nurture Groups to measure social, emotional and behavioural development.</p> <p>Reducing the number / % of suspensions (and expulsions) per annum</p>
Early Intervention	<p>Accurate, timely recording and analysis of data frequently for trends.</p> <p>Acting on absence promptly on Day 1. If they are not in school – where are they?</p> <p>Reaching out to frequently absent students to find out in a supportive manner why they are missing school and what would help them attend more regularly.</p> <p>Working with parents to stress the importance of early education and to learn about any barriers to good attendance.</p> <p>Creating a nurturing, engaging classroom that will encourage children to come to school.</p>	<p>Increase in overall pupil attendance.</p> <p>Increase regular / at risk attendance.</p> <p>Increase the number of parents engaged with Nurture Groups.</p> <p>Reduce chronic / severe chronic attendance.</p> <p>Increase in overall pupil attendance.</p> <p>Increase regular / at risk attendance.</p> <p>Reduce chronic / severe chronic attendance.</p>
Effective Support	<p>Embedding pastoral care and restorative practices.</p> <p>Embedding a culture of proactive management of attendance throughout the school.</p> <p>Dedicated support within the school and outside the school e.g. – Education Welfare Service or Community.</p> <p>Evaluating the impact of actions taken.</p> <p>Identifying lessons learned and promoting effective practices.</p>	<p>Monitor the number of children and families supported by EWS per annum.</p> <p>Monitor the number of cases dealt with by EWS within an agreed timescale with school / setting.</p> <p>Reducing the number / % of suspensions (and expulsions) per annum.</p> <p>Identify examples of best practice in addressing bullying type behaviour and the impact on attendance.</p>

Effective Engagement

Communicating frequently with parents – and securing their early involvement.
Engaging regularly with external organisations to provide extra support.
Working with Health professionals or Early Years Professionals to understand the issues that may impact pupil attendance.
Involving the local community, e.g. community use of schools and / or examples identified through the RAISE programme.
Encourage families to partner with other school staff, such as social workers or nurses, as well as community agencies to get supports needed to help children and families solve a significant barrier to getting to school.
Promoting messages about positive impact of regular attendance.

Improvements in relationships between the school, parents and the wider community as measured by annual survey.
Identify impact of programmes such as Extended Schools or Sure Start to build effective relationships with parents and the community.
Identify examples of effective practice where the school works closely with other relevant statutory and voluntary agencies to promote good attendance.
Identify examples of effective practice where the EA and other agencies assist in providing support to improve pupil attendance (e.g. Social Services, Department of Health, Department for Communities and the Executive Office).
Identify examples of effective practice where the Department collaborates with cross sectoral and cross departmental partners to explore how the importance of attendance can be promoted.

Conclusion

The Department of Education is committed to promoting regular pupil attendance, so that every child has the maximum opportunity to reach their full potential. This is even more important since the Covid-19 pandemic when attitudes to regular in-person attendance at school seems to have changed. Additionally, the impact of the pandemic has been evident in families, parents and pupils and we have heard repeated concerns from teachers and school principals about witnessing a level of EBSNA / anxiety on an unprecedented scale.

This new strategy provides a coherent framework for action and improvement to guide all those working to support regular and improved pupil attendance. The focus will be to understand more about the causes of poor attendance and hear directly from or consult with poor attendees, their families or schools. This strategy will strengthen leadership commitment, early intervention, effective support and collaboration and engagement, underpinned by the sharing of effective practice, to empower our young people, build their self confidence and ensure that everyone recognises that Attendance Matters.

Ultimately, the overall aim of this strategy is to improve support for pupils in schools and settings. The extent of our success in achieving this aim will be seen in an increase in attendance rates as well as reducing suspension and expulsion rates and closing in any attainment gaps that exist amongst those learners identified as vulnerable.

Making improvements on these indicators will demonstrate that the interventions have been successful.

Annex A - Glossary of Terms

BoGs	Board of Governors
CFS	Common Funding Scheme: Under the provisions of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, a Common Funding Scheme (Scheme) has been drawn up to apply to all grant-aided schools funded under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements.
Department	Department of Education
EA	Education Authority
EBSNA	Emotional Based School Non-Attendance
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
EWS	Education Welfare Service is a specialist education support service which helps young people of compulsory school age and their families to get the best out of the education system. EWS enables the EA to fulfil its statutory duty in respect of pupil attendance.
FSME	Free School Meal Entitlement
IES	Intercultural Education Service; offers advice, resources and support to schools and teachers who are working with Travellers, Roma and Newcomer pupils.
CEC / CLA	A Care Experienced Child / Children Looked After is a child or young person who is in the care of a Trust or who is provided with accommodation by a Trust.
Newcomer	A child or young person who is enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher.
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
Parent	Refers to the parent, carer and / or legal guardian of a child or young person.
IES	The Intercultural Education Service; It provides support to schools, Traveller, Roma and Newcomer children to improve educational outcomes.