

# School Attendance and Absence in England: Working with Data to Inform Policy and Practice Beneficial to Young People

Sara Griffiths<sup>1</sup>, Victoria Esme Franklin<sup>2</sup>, David Heyne<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Independent Attendance Expert, Cornwall, England

<sup>2</sup> President, National Association for Support Workers in Education, England

<sup>3</sup> School of Psychology, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

**Abstract:** This paper presents a comprehensive overview of the recording, reporting, and use of data pertaining to school attendance and absence in England. To establish a foundation, we outline the educational context in England, alongside an explanation of the legal framework guiding the collection and use of attendance and absence data. Subsequently, we elucidate the definition and documentation of various types of absence in England, the methodologies employed for data collection and dissemination, as well as the utilisation of this data for benchmarking purposes. Notably, attendance serves as a key performance indicator for schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities, aiming to improve the educational outcomes of young people. Through a critical examination of the current policy and practice in England concerning data on school attendance and absence, we identify strengths and weaknesses. Based on our findings, we propose additional actions to improve the consistency of data collection and foster the effective reporting and use of data to support prompt responses as needed. Through these suggestions, our endeavour is to drive continuous improvement and optimise outcomes for young people in England.

**Keywords:** school attendance, school absence, school attendance data, reporting, England, policy, practice

There is a rich literature on attendance and absence in English schools (some recent examples being Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023; Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; HM Government, 2022e), but a clear gap exists regarding recording, reporting and utilising school attendance data. Our article contributes to filling this gap by (a) providing a comprehensive overview of the current landscape regarding data on school attendance and absence; and (b) offering recommendations for policy and practice. The content of this study primarily relies on governmental documents and the extensive experience of authors SG and VF with the educational context and legal framework in England. All three authors share a common mission: to promote the effective utilisation of school attendance data, ultimately aiming to improve access to education for all young people and, consequently, enhance outcomes for them.

To establish context, Section 1 presents an overview of the educational environment in England, and Section 2 presents the associated legal framework. Section 3 draws attention to the codes used to record attendance and absence, while Section 4 clarifies the methods of reporting data and the specific nature of the reported data. Section 5 delves into how this data is used at national, local, and school levels.

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- 2 Additionally, Sections 3 to 5 address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the recording, reporting, and use of data on attendance and absence. In Section 6, a critical reflection on the current systems and practices reveals both strengths and limitations, culminating in a range of policy and practice recommendations. Our overarching aim is for the power of data to be harnessed to create an environment in England that maximises educational opportunities for young people (i.e., school-aged children and adolescents).

## 1 The Educational Context in England

In the United Kingdom, which comprises England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, there exist both similarities and differences concerning laws, regulations, policies, and practices related to school attendance. This paper focuses on England.

### 1.1 Compulsory Education

In England, it is mandatory for young people to receive a full-time education starting in the school term following their fifth birthday (Education Act, 1996). Prior to 2013, they were required to remain in education until the end of the summer term after turning 16. However, a change in the law in 2013 extended the mandatory education, employment, or training period until the age of 18 (Education and Skills Act, 2008).

The education system in England offers free education to young people between the ages of 3 and 18. Nursery school is available from the age of 3, followed by transition to primary school at the age of 4 or 5. Subsequently, young people move on to secondary school in the school year following their 11th birthday. To comply with the requirements of the Education and Skills Act (2008), education beyond the age of 16 is provided through secondary school or college. This provision may include work or volunteering (of at least twenty hours) alongside part-time education or training, leading to regulated qualifications or participation in an apprenticeship, traineeship, or supported internship.

Any institution that offers full-time education to five or more young people of compulsory school age must be registered with the Department for Education (DfE, 2018). Although there is currently no legal definition of full-time education, for the purposes of registration with the DfE, it is understood to mean the provision of the majority or entirety of a young person's education.

### 1.2 Types of Educational Provision

In England, education is primarily delivered through mainstream schools, where young people of all abilities are educated together, with additional support for those with identified learning needs. There is a strong emphasis on inclusion and equality, underpinned by legislation. Mainstream schools organise education based

on age-related year groups, and typically, young people progress through their compulsory education within their designated year group. It is uncommon for young people to be held back a year, as this practice is discouraged in England. While parents (meaning parents or carers) have the option to request that very young children repeat their first non-compulsory school year, this is not a common occurrence.

Special education school settings are available for young people who require a level of support that mainstream schools cannot provide, due to their high levels of need. There are also alternative education settings that serve as temporary education arrangement to support pupils with behavioural, physical, or mental health needs.

In addition, England maintains a selective grammar school system, where entry is based on an examination taken in the final year of primary school to assess academic ability. Some grammar schools are private fee-paying schools while others are not. However, it is important to note that this type of provision is not available throughout the entire country.

### 1.3 Changes in the Educational Landscape

In the past two decades, the educational landscape in England has undergone significant transformations. Governments, one after another, have not only encouraged but also, more recently, mandated schools to transition from being maintained by local government to become independent entities that still receive direct funding from the government.

Consequently, a diverse range of educational provision has emerged. While some schools continue to be maintained by the Local Authority, which is a local government administrative area, others have become Single Academy Trusts or have joined forces with other schools to establish Multi-Academy Trusts. These Single and Multi-Academy Trusts (hereafter referred to as Trusts) operate under the governance of a separate board, independent from the Local Authority.

It appears that the government increasingly expects schools to embrace this model of education delivery, driven by the underlying rationale of raising standards. According to the government's perspective, "We need a stronger and fairer system that will allow all children to feel the benefits of strong trusts if we are to deliver the ambitions set out in this white paper" (DfE, 2022d, p. 46).

## 2 The Legal Framework in England

The first legislation to enforce school attendance and eradicate child labour was the Education Act (1870). It mandated that young people between the ages of 5 and 10 attend school. Since then, England has established a comprehensive system of laws and regulations that have undergone amendments and updates over the years,

4 through a series of Acts of Parliament. These measures aim to enhance access to primary and secondary education.

The Department for Education (DfE) serves as the government department responsible for young people's services and education. Its purview includes early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships, and broader skills. The DfE formulates policies, drafts laws, and develops regulations for parliamentary approval. The Secretary of State for Education, a minister within the UK government, oversees the department's activities.

Local Authorities assume the responsibility for administering the statutory duties related to education and required of local government (Education Act, 1996). These duties encompass ensuring sufficient educational provision, facilitating school transportation, fostering school improvement, monitoring school attendance, and initiating legal actions if necessary. While Local Authorities may have different levels of resources, for attendance monitoring purposes they are expected to review data, offer guidance and support, and ensure that every young person receives an education suitable for their age, abilities, and aptitude, whether at school or through education at home.

## 2.1 Statutes and Regulations

In this section, we will outline the statutes and regulations that were applicable as of April 2022. These legal provisions pertain to young people of compulsory school age. Schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities are obligated to adhere strictly to the statutory guidance issued by the DfE. The following is a selection of laws within the intricate legal framework that the authors consider to be the most significant regarding attendance.

In England, the school year consists of 39 weeks or 195 days, divided into three terms and six half terms, with school holidays occurring between each half term. The three terms take place between September and December, January and March or April (depending on the Easter date), and March or April through to July. The specific dates of these terms vary annually due to their alignment with public holidays. These dates are determined not at a national level, but by Trusts and Local Authorities. This variability can pose challenges for parents with children attending different schools or within different Local Authorities, potentially impacting attendance. The variability in dates can also impact the comparability of attendance and absence data from one year to the next.

There exist laws and regulations relating to various aspects, such as pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those with Health Needs. These laws outline the requirements to support young people in accessing education and address issues of missed education (DfE, 2013). Additional laws govern child performance (acting and modelling) and child employment, including some outdated local bylaws. These provisions aim to safeguard a young person's education against any adverse effects caused by performing or employment obligations.

Furthermore, Local Authorities bear a legal responsibility to provide education after a young person's absence of fifteen days, particularly if health-related concerns are involved (DfE, 2013). When schools identify a need for provision, they will request Local Authorities to address the situation, but the decision-making process may vary due to different criteria applicable at the local level. Such provisions could involve remote learning, specialised support, or attendance at alternative educational or therapeutic facilities.

## **2.2 Duty Placed on Parents, School Attendance Orders, and Children Missing Education**

Parents have a legal duty, as outlined in Section 7 of the Education Act (1996), to ensure that their child of compulsory school age receives a suitable education, either through regular attendance at school or otherwise. The definition of "regular attendance" was tested in the Supreme Court case of *Isle of Wight Council versus Platt*, where it was determined that regular attendance is defined "in accordance with the rules prescribed by the school" (*Isle of Wight Council, Appellant, v. Platt, Respondent*, 2017). Receiving an education "otherwise" refers to young people who are home-educated and therefore not registered at a school, a choice that parents have the right to make. Failure by parents to ensure their child receives a suitable education can result in penalties of up to £2,500 in fines, imprisonment for up to three months, and/or the imposition of a parenting order, which may include attending parenting classes or receiving one-on-one parenting support.

When a young person is not enrolled in school or receiving a deemed "suitable" education (suitable according to age, ability, and aptitude, according to the Education Act, 1996), the Local Authority can apply for a school attendance order. This order compels parents to register their child at a specified school, and failure to comply can lead to prosecution. Local Authorities are responsible for initiating prosecutions and must conduct their investigations in accordance with the standards outlined in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984), which specifies standards for interviewing and evidence gathering.

Children missing education are the responsibility of the Local Authority. Under section 436A of the Education Act (1996), Local Authorities are legally obligated to make arrangements to identify, to the best of their ability, children who are missing education (DfE, 2013/2016). Statutory guidance must be followed, including the provision that schools cannot remove a young person from the school roll unless specific criteria for one of the 15 grounds for deletion from the school admission register are met (*The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations, 2006*).

If a Local Authority suspects that a young person of compulsory school age is not receiving a proper education, such as irregular attendance at school, they can seek an Education Supervision Order through a family court under Section 36 of *The Children Act (1989)*. An appointed supervisor from the Local Authority provides guidance, assistance, and support to the young person and their parents to ensure proper

- 6 education is received. The Education Supervision Order typically lasts for twelve months but can be extended. Before deciding whether to proceed with a prosecution (as described earlier), an application for an Education Supervision Order must be considered.

### 2.3 Fines as a Legal Option ('Disposal')

The Anti-Social Behaviour Act (2003) and Education Penalty Notices Regulations (2007) provide schools with the option to request that the Local Authority issue penalty notices, commonly known as fines. These notices are primarily utilised for unauthorised holiday absences. In England, parents are advised against taking their children out of school during term time unless exceptional circumstances apply. Currently, the fine stands at £60 for each parent of a child (i.e., both parents in a two-parent family are fined) if paid within 21 days. If the fine is paid between 21 and 28 days after the notice is issued, the amount increases to £120. Failure to pay fines may result in prosecution.

A government consultation was conducted to explore the creation of a National Code of Conduct for all Local Authorities, which included discussions on the use of penalty notices (DfE, 2022h). The consultation concluded in July 2022, and at the time of writing, the results are pending.

## 3 Recording School Attendance and Absence

In England, national guidelines are in place to ensure consistency in data collection, which is important because the data informs practice. Schools are legally obligated to record attendance and absence twice per day, commonly known as 'registering', to indicate the physical presence of young people on school premises. The requirements for recording attendance and absence are specified in The Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations (2006). It is important to note that attendance and absence are recorded on a session basis rather than a full day basis, with recording taking place at the start of the morning session and again during the afternoon session.

The timing of recording varies among schools, and each school must clearly communicate the applicable time to parents. For consistency, recording is conducted at the same time every day within a school, without variations for individual pupils. Typically, the register remains open for around 15 minutes after it has been opened, but it must not close more than either 30 minutes after the session commences or the duration of the first lesson during which recording occurs. If a pupil is not physically present when recording occurs, but arrives before the register is closed, they will receive a 'Late' mark, which does not count as an absence but allows tracking of the number of late arrivals. Schools may impose disciplinary measures for persistent lateness. In cases where pupils arrive after the register has closed, an 'unauthorised

absence' code is applied, unless the school acknowledges a valid reason for late arrival, in which case an alternative code can be used, as described next.

School personnel use specified codes outlined in DfE guidance (DfE, 2022g) to record the attendance or absence of young people. Various electronic systems are employed by schools to record this information and generate reports. While there is no legal requirement to use the prescribed codes, our observations suggest that they are commonly used nationwide. The determination of whether an absence is authorised or unauthorised lies with the school and is based on available information from diverse sources, as well as the school's understanding of a family's circumstances. The guidance undergoes periodic updates, typically occurring once every one or two years (HM Government, 2022a). The codes employed for recording attendance and absence fall into the following categories:

- *Present*. Pupils who arrive late to school but before the register has closed will also be counted as being present.
- *Attending an approved educational activity*. This includes, for example, work experience, an interview, a sporting activity agreed upon by the school, education off-site (agreed temporary attendance at another educational provision), and being on a residential trip. Statistically, these pupils will be considered 'present' even if they are not physically on the school site. Each approved activity is assigned a different code.
- *Absent: Authorised absence*. This includes pupils who are ill or have medical and dental appointments, pupils who are temporarily excluded for behavioural issues and have assigned work to complete at home (the timeframe for pupils subject to this arrangement is limited to five days, after which the pupil must return to school or alternative provision must be provided by the Local Authority), and those who have received authorised leave of absence from the school. Again, each reason for authorised absence is assigned a different code.
- *Absent: Unauthorised absence*. This category covers situations where absence has not been agreed upon, the school is dissatisfied with the reason provided, or no reason has been given. It also includes cases where a pupil arrives at school after the register has closed without providing an acceptable reason. The morning and afternoon closing times of the school register vary nationally, as schools are responsible for determining this themselves. However, the specific closing time must be specified in the school's attendance policy.
- *Absent: Unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances*. This category encompasses situations such as school closure due to severe transport issues, severe weather conditions, lack of heating, and so on. The code for these absences indicates that the pupil was not present on the school site, but the absence does not count statistically as an absence for the individual pupil or the entire school.

The responsibility for recording attendance and absence may fall on a class teacher, form tutor, or subject teacher. Typically, they record only the attendance itself without specifying the reason for absence. Subsequently, an administrator, designated attendance officer, or pastoral officer determines the appropriate code to

8 be used in cases of pupil absence. They accomplish this by directly contacting the parent through phone, text, or email to gather further information. Due to the legal and child protection implications associated with code usage, its application is limited to staff members who have received training in these areas. All staff members involved in school attendance are expected to uphold high standards of accuracy in the comprehensive analysis and recording of absence reason. It is important to note that only Head Teachers hold the legal authority to authorise a pupil's absence.

In secondary schools, attendance in subject lessons is also recorded. This enables the identification of pupils who were initially registered as present during the morning or afternoon session but are subsequently absent from one of more lessons. Efforts are made to locate these pupils, which may involve searching for them elsewhere on the school premises because they are avoiding a specific lesson or receiving instruction in a different part of the school. If the pupil cannot be located, the parent is notified, and if the young person is considered vulnerable, professionals or the police may be contacted. Therefore, recording attendance in subject lessons contributes to the safeguarding of pupils and assists in identifying any issues they may have with specific lessons.

Special arrangements were made during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the recording of attendance and absence. At certain points, school attendance was not mandatory, and schools were only open to vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. When school attendance became mandatory again, schools could use additional attendance codes to indicate when a pupil was absent due to COVID-19-related reasons, such as the need to isolate or a positive COVID-19 test result. Sub-categories were introduced to existing absence codes to facilitate this process. This ensured clear documentation of individual pupils' absence reasons and prevented schools and pupils from facing penalties for low attendance. The DfE guidance document also outlined the expectation for schools to provide access to remote education for pupils absent under these circumstances, and to record their engagement with these activities. This recording did not necessarily have to be within the conventional attendance register. Based on the authors' experience, schools adopted various approaches to fulfil these requirements. Schools were also responsible for following up on absence from or non-engagement with remote learning, as a means to safeguard pupils and support their continuous learning (DfE, 2022e).

## 4 Reporting School Attendance and Absence

At the national level, the DfE has been collecting and publishing data since 2006 through a school census. This census involves extracting school-level attendance and absence data for the Spring, Summer, and Autumn terms from all schools. In this context, "school-level" means that individual pupils are not identified in the census. Instead, the focus is on the number of pupils present each day relative to the total number of enrolled pupils in the school. If a pupil changes school during the year,



they may be counted in two different school censuses, but their attendance and absence sessions will only be accounted for during the periods they attended each school. Each census corresponds to the preceding school term. For instance, the Spring census collects information on attendance and absence during the Autumn term. The census is conducted after the completion of the term to ensure that all attendance and absence data are included.

Annually, the DfE publishes this data through three National Statistics releases. The data covers the Autumn term (published in May of the following calendar year), the Autumn and Spring terms (published in October of the following academic year), and the entire academic year (published in March of the following calendar year). The data release for the whole academic year provides a definitive overview of pupil absence, as term-specific data can be influenced by the duration of the term. Therefore, term-based data serve only indicative purposes but can be utilised by schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities, for benchmarking and analysing trends within specific periods.

The data published by the DfE is not presented in a single report. Instead, different pages on the government website provide access to various sources of information and data. For example, one page describes the methodology used to create pupil absence statistics (HM Government, 2023a), another provides access to full-year statistics (HM Government, 2023b), and additional pages offer data related to each term. Users have the option to download the data and create tables according to their preferred analysis methods.

The available data includes two key measures of absence: the overall absence rate, and the rate of persistent absence (HM Government, 2023a). The overall absence rate refers to the total number of absence sessions (i.e., half days absent), for authorised and unauthorised absences, as a percentage of the total number of possible sessions, across all pupils. The rate of persistent absence indicates the proportion of pupils, out of the total pupil population, who have missed 10% or more of the possible sessions they could have attended at school. These two measures are presented for the overall pupil population in England, as well as for various sub-groups, including primary schools, secondary schools, special schools, pupil referral units, each year group within these types of education, reason for absence, gender, ethnicity, special educational needs, English as a first language, free school meals, length of absence within each setting, Local Authority, regional areas (e.g., south west, north east), and areas of deprivation.

In a noteworthy development, ad hoc data on the number of children being home-educated in England was first published in May 2023 (HM Government, 2023c). There is an ongoing consultation regarding the possibility of maintaining a register for these young people (Long & Danechi, 2023).

The national reporting of data has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing this paper, the most recent full-year publication of attendance and absence data was in March 2022, covering the academic year 2020–2021. The presented data was influenced by school closures, which limited

10 its broader applicability. As mentioned in Section 3, schools were closed for certain periods, and only a limited number of pupils could attend. Consequently, the number of possible attendance sessions per pupil was reduced, resulting in fewer overall sessions for calculating “persistently absent”. Subsequent reports on attendance and absence are available for the Autumn 2021 term (published in May 2022) and the Autumn and Spring terms across 2021 and 2022 (published in October 2022). In March 2023, a new full-year publication of attendance and absence data was released (HM Government, 2023b).

At the school level, it is mandatory for schools to regularly inform the Local Authority about pupils who exhibit regular absence, have irregular attendance, or have missed 10 or more school days without the school’s permission (DfE, 2013, updated 2016).

## 5 Using Data on School Attendance and Absence

The recording and reporting of data on attendance and absence would hold little value if the data were not used to inform policy and practices aimed at promoting attendance and reducing absenteeism. Therefore, we will now outline how data concerning school attendance and absence are used at the national level, within Local Authorities and Trusts, and at the school level.

### 5.1 National Level

Data on attendance and absence play a crucial role for various national bodies, including government and non-government organisations as listed on the UK Government’s website (HM Government, 2023a). Government organisations such as the DfE and the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) use this data in their operations. For instance, Ofsted’s school inspection process, which aims to monitor and enhance standards of education in England, includes a specific focus on attendance. This involves analysing rates of absence and persistent absence, improvements among low-attendance pupils, instances of pupils being taken off the roll, and occurrences of exclusions and suspensions (Ofsted, 2019/2023). In another example, Ofsted’s (2022) report titled *Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence* used national data to identify significant factors contributing to higher-than-normal absences following the COVID-19 pandemic. The government also links attendance and absence data to safeguarding young people and ensuring positive outcomes for the most vulnerable, including young people in the care of Local Authorities and those defined as in need under Section 17 of the Children’s Act (1989).

Moreover, data is used to address parliamentary questions and public inquiries. For instance, in January 2023, the Education Committee of the UK Parliament initiated an inquiry into persistent absence (i.e., missing at least 10% of school sessions), severe absence (i.e., missing more than 50% of school sessions), and support for

disadvantaged pupils (*MPs launch new inquiry...*, 2023). The inquiry involved sharing information regarding absence rates across different periods (i.e., the 2021 Autumn term compared to the 2018/2019 academic year) and sub-groups (such as pupils eligible for free meals or those receiving SEND support).

Non-government organisations also rely on attendance and absence data, including providers of analysis services to schools such as the Fischer Family Trust and Datalab (<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/>) as well as think tank organisations such as the Education Policy Institute (<https://epi.org.uk/>). Research groups have worked with the DfE's National Pupil Database, which contains data on absence among all pupils in England who have received state education and were born since 1986. For example, Lereya et al. (2019) used the National Pupil Database to examine the associations between educational attainment, absenteeism, and mental health difficulties among more than 15,000 pupils from 97 mainstream schools in England. They found a positive link between specific mental health difficulties and absenteeism. In another study, Lereya et al. (2023) investigated how SEND acted as a risk factor for absenteeism among over 418,000 secondary school pupils from 151 Local Authorities in England. The research demonstrated that pupils with SEND were more likely to experience absence, both authorised and unauthorised, and the relationship between SEND and absenteeism varied substantially across different Local Authorities. Alabbad (2020) examined school attendance, exclusions, and academic attainment among more than 554,000 pupils from the National Pupil Database, revealing that eligibility for free school meals was a predictor of attendance, exclusions, and attainment.

## 5.2 Local Authority Level

National absence data is available to Local Authorities for comparison across Authorities and across schools within an Authority, enabling strategic planning at a local level. Local Authorities also collect data directly from schools in their area through a locally established data sharing protocol, although not all Local Authorities currently have this system in place. The shared data includes information such as the number of young people removed from the roll, the names of young people not in education, and those who are being educated at home. Authors VF and SG have observed various uses of this data. These uses include measuring exclusion rates to target behaviour improvement actions and tracking young people who are missing from school, have not attended for long periods, or are allowed to attend a reduced number of sessions at school.

The government also gathers data from Local Authorities regarding the number of penalty notices, prosecutions, and parenting orders implemented by each Local Authority, categorised by variables such as ethnicity and geographical area (DfE, 2021b). Authors SG and VF have observed the use of this data to commission research into the differential use of penalty notices, and to enhance the effective allocation of resources, such as when the government requests organisations to focus

12 their support work on specific areas of the country. A recent example of this is the successful bid made by Barnardo's, a charitable organisation, to provide targeted, responsive, one-to-one support for persistently and severely absent pupils in several designated Education Investment areas across England (DfE, 2022i). Schools refer young people based on their persistent absence and potential benefit from such support. This programme is currently in the pilot phase, and its success may lead to further expansion.

In recent reports by the Children's Commissioner for England (2022a; 2022b), data from all 151 Local Authorities, along with an in-depth analysis of 10 specific Local Authorities, was utilised to gain insights into young people who are missing from education. This attendance audit resulted in the formulation of six key ambitions "to ensure that every child supported to be in school every day, ready to learn, is receiving a fantastic education, and, critically, that we know where they are and that they are safe" (p. 4). The report includes policy recommendations aimed at achieving this goal.

### 5.3 School Level

School personnel use data pertaining to individual pupils, groups of pupils, and the entire school. Regarding individual pupils, the school's data on daily attendance and absence is intended to be used for identifying those who are not present, in order to take appropriate action. This assists schools in fulfilling their safeguarding duty by investigating any unexplained absences (DfE, 2023). In the experience of the authors, information about a pupil's absence is used during case discussions aimed at obtaining resources from other support agencies (e.g., a social worker; additional resources for pupils with special educational needs). Furthermore, attendance and absence data is used to plan school-led interventions staged according to the level of absence and concern, and both the details of the intervention and the level of absence and concern are shared with parents and the pupil.

Data reports generated through a school's information management system are to be used to monitor attendance and absence of all pupils *and* for specific groups, as outlined in the DfE guidance (DfE, 2022g). The guidance specifies that groups to be tracked include persistently absent pupils or those at risk of becoming persistently absent, as well as vulnerable young people. Schools are required to monitor the attendance of these pupils due to additional funding allocated for vulnerable young people, considering the well-documented educational disadvantages faced by this cohort (e.g., Butera et al., 2020; Fleming et al., 2017).

Analysis of whole school data is conducted to inform the school's attendance policy, guide school development, and identify areas that require additional resources (DfE, 2022g). For instance, this analysis may highlight the need to address punctuality or use pastoral staff to foster a welcoming and safe environment for pupils. The school's data is also reviewed during the inspection process, as described in Section 5.1.

## 6 Discussion

In this section, we critically analyse the strengths and shortcomings of the current systems and practices in England concerning the recording, reporting, and use of data on attendance and absence. Subsequently, we propose recommendations for policy and practice aimed at enhancing outcomes for young people by optimising their educational opportunities.

### 6.1 Strengths

The recording of attendance and absence is a statutory requirement, supported by clear guidance on coding absences and the expectation that schools adhere to government guidance. This facilitates timely and consistent recording, enabling local, regional, and national comparisons and benchmarking, as well as the monitoring of trends related to attendance, absence, and reasons for absence. This comprehensive data provides a basis for implementing necessary policy and practice changes in a timely manner.

Regarding data reporting, the government collects information from schools through their internal information management systems (Section 5.3) and the national census (Section 4), including data for specific groups such as pupils receiving free school meals. Encouragingly, there have been ongoing developments and improvements in systems for reporting attendance and absence. For instance, the government initiated a pilot programme in June 2022 to collect daily data directly from school electronic management systems, and at the time of writing, 83% of schools participate in this programme. This initiative will provide schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities with more up-to-date pupil-level data on attendance and absence, facilitating the identification of trends and prompt responses.

In England, attendance and absence data can benefit both individual pupils and the broader pupil population. At the individual level, schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities can effectively safeguard pupils by identifying and tracking those missing education. At a broader level, schools, Local Authorities, and the national government can adapt policies and practices to better support vulnerable pupils who face various challenges, such as physical or mental health issues, food insecurity, homelessness, exclusion from school, or living with parents with health problems. Schools can compare their absence rates and types of absence with other schools regionally and nationally, allowing them to identify areas for intervention if, for example, exclusion or illness rates are higher than regional or national averages. The authors believe that targeting support and resources to areas of greatest need represents a more effective use of public funds.

The publication of additional data during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided insights into attendance and absence rates within the context of the pandemic's impact. It has also strengthened the government's commitment to raising attendance levels above pre-pandemic levels, as evidenced by reports such as the 2023 report

- 14 from the Children’s Commissioner (2023) and the inquiry launched in 2023 by the Education Committee of the UK Parliament (*MPs launch new inquiry...*, 2023). The government’s intention to collaborate with schools, Trusts, and Local Authorities to improve attendance is also evident in the white paper *Opportunity for All* (DfE, 2022d) and the public consultation on measures to enhance the consistency of support available to families in England regarding school attendance (DfE, 2022f). The ongoing commitment to address attendance and absence is further demonstrated by the Schools Bill (HM Government, 2022b) which, although delayed beyond September 2023, maintains the expectations placed on all parties involved.

## 6.2 Areas Requiring Attention

While acknowledging the aforementioned strengths, there is significant room for improvement in how attendance and absence data are recorded, reported, and used in England. The authors believe that the quality and quantity of available data will shed light on areas of policy and practice that require attention. The following sections outline the most evident areas for improvement.

### 6.2.1 The Legal Framework

There are regional variations in the use of enforcement measures related to non-attendance. For instance, out of 155 Local Authorities, 27 were responsible for issuing over 50% of all penalty notices. Conversely, three Local Authorities issued no penalty notices, while nine issued less than 100 and six issued more than 5,000 (HM Government, 2022c). This highlights an inequitable system. Recent research has indicated that the use of legal sanctions for non-attendance disproportionately affects women, with many court cases involving young people with special educational needs (Restorative Justice, Coventry, 2019). In England and Wales in 2017, over 16,000 individuals were prosecuted for truancy, with 71% of them being women. Among the 12,000 convictions, 74% were against women. Furthermore, out of the 500 people who received a community order, 83% were women, and out of the 10 individuals sent to prison, 90% were women. The effectiveness of legal sanctions for non-attendance, both for young people with special educational needs and for all young people, is debatable. Restorative interventions that aim to foster positive relationships between school personnel, parents, and young people are considered to be more effective alternatives to punitive measures like fines, as the latter are believed to exacerbate absenteeism (Kearney et al., 2022). It is a prevailing perspective among professionals in the field that absence should prompt the provision of support rather than punitive consequences, and we share this standpoint.

### 6.2.2 Recording School Attendance and Absence

The accuracy of recording attendance and absence data has far-reaching implications for both practice and policy. Inaccuracies at the local level can hinder Local Authority teams from taking legal action regarding specific individuals, while at the

national level, the quality of data significantly influences well-informed policy decisions. To ensure accuracy in recording, clear guidelines and comprehensive training are essential.

Unfortunately, the existing DfE guidance does not offer definitive coverage for all codes, leaving room for subjective interpretation by school personnel. This ambiguity contributes to inconsistencies and compromises the overall quality of national data. However, addressing these issues locally can be accomplished through staff training and limiting the number of personnel authorised to assign codes within schools.

At the school level, differentiating between absences due to physical health and those related to mental health is important. This distinction enables a nuanced understanding of the underlying reasons for illness-related absences, facilitating the provision of appropriate support to young people and their families, including access to mental health services.

Moreover, school-level misuse of certain absence codes can obscure underlying issues. For instance, the improper use of the B code, which signifies attendance at another provision for a limited time, can conceal a pupil's absence since it does not register statistically as an absence. This practice, referred to as 'gaming,' raises concerns about whether pupils are receiving the expected level and quality of education and are safeguarded. Although school inspectors may inquire about education provision for pupils with a B code and challenge inappropriate use, there is currently no national oversight regarding the quantity or quality of learning for pupils registered at school but learning from home.

### ***6.2.3 Reporting School Attendance and Absence***

Schools use different information management systems for data on attendance and absence. This leads to a lack of consistency among schools at the local level when it comes to generating reports, which could hinder local benchmarking efforts. In order to improve reporting on pupils' attendance and absence, schools and Trusts are transitioning to new platforms. As noted in Section 6.1, 83% of schools have voluntarily participated in the DfE's pilot programme, which involves the daily collection of data through a portal established by Wonde (HM Government, 2022d). This bodes well for greater consistency in schools' attendance and absence reports. Moreover, we recommend making the new national data collection via Wonde mandatory for schools to ensure the most up to date and comprehensive data is available at both local and national levels.

### ***6.2.4 Using Data on Attendance and Absence***

At the school level, data ought to be used as a source of encouragement for both young people and parents. School personnel can use publicly available data to highlight the link between regular attendance and positive outcomes (e.g., HM Government, 2022e), along with evidence highlighting the positive impact of a pupil's own attendance, whether it be a positive impact for learning, socialising, or other

16 outcomes associated with attendance. Additionally, projects like the one launched in England to evaluate the impact on attendance of text message communication with parents can inform school personnel's use of data to encourage pupils and parents (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.).

At the local level, there are inconsistencies across Local Authorities regarding the utilisation of data. Establishing protocols for data sharing between schools and Local Authorities, as well as guidelines for the effective utilisation of data, can ensure that comprehensive datasets are readily available for well-informed decision-making on resource allocation to address areas of greatest need. The frequency of data sharing also requires attention, as many Local Authorities do not have immediate access to complete and timely data within their own jurisdiction, leading to delays in taking appropriate actions. Improving the frequency of data sharing at local and national levels would enhance the understanding of current issues and facilitate prompt action. In our opinion, mandating all schools to provide data on a daily basis, without the current 10-day lag, would be ideal for the system.

At the national level, the historical collection and comparison of absence codes by the DfE have overlooked codes that do not statistically count as absences, despite the pupils not physically being present at the school site (e.g., "attending an approved educational activity" and "unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances" as discussed in Section 3). The absence of national data on these codes prevents schools and Local Authorities from benchmarking their use against others in terms of numbers or percentages. Having access to this data would better inform national policy and practice, enhance understanding of regional differences in types of absences, and guide potential changes in regulations and legislation.

The research outcomes derived from various groups using the DfE's National Pupil Database, as discussed in Section 5.1, also have significant implications for policy and practice. For instance, Leraya et al. (2019) highlight the necessity for enhanced collaboration between schools and mental health services, while Alabbad (2020) advocated for improved data on school exclusions. Integrating these research findings into policy and practice can facilitate the implementation of targeted interventions and support for young people, ultimately maximising their educational outcomes.

### 6.3 Conclusion

In England, the collection of absence data from all schools through a census has been in place since 2006. In the years since then, there have been notable advancements in the realm of school attendance and absence data. The current system showcases numerous strengths, including a statutory obligation to record attendance and absence, guidelines on coding absences, and comprehensive data collection that enables comparisons and trend monitoring. These strengths facilitate the identification of vulnerable pupils and aid in the development of effective policies. However, there is still room for improvement in the recording, reporting, and use of data on attendance and absence.



The legal framework for non-attendance enforcement measures shows regional variations, disproportionately affecting certain groups. Restorative interventions are considered more desirable than punitive measures. Clearer guidelines are needed to ensure accuracy in recording attendance and absence, including the need to differentiate between physical and mental health absences. The misuse of absence codes should be addressed to uncover underlying issues. Reporting on attendance lacks consistency due to different information management systems. Transitioning to new platforms shows promise for improving reporting consistency. Mandatory participation in national data collection would provide clearer oversight. Moreover, protocols for data sharing and use at the local level, along with improved frequency of data sharing, would support informed decision-making and prompt action.

Comprehensive attendance training for school personnel, including those in governance roles, is important. Released guidance emphasises integrating attendance training into professional development opportunities (DfE, 2022g). However, the lack of national accreditation raises concerns about variations in training quality.

Overall, addressing the identified areas for improvement will enhance the educational opportunities and outcomes for young people in England. By enhancing the recording, reporting, and use of attendance and absence data, policymakers and educators can better support vulnerable pupils, promote inclusive practices, and allocate resources to areas of greatest need, ultimately ensuring that every pupil receives the education they deserve.

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Corresponding author:

Victoria E. Franklin

President of the National Association for Support Workers in Education

97 Park Grove Henleaze, Bristol BS9 4NY

England

[victoriaesmefranklin@gmail.com](mailto:victoriaesmefranklin@gmail.com)