

Setting an effective attendance policy

The new 'Working Together to Improve Attendance' guidance becomes statutory on the 19th August 2024 and includes the expectation for schools to have a clear school attendance policy which the whole school community understands. An effective attendance policy covers how schools promote a whole school culture of high attendance by detailing the school's expectations, procedures and responsibilities. This is to assist you in reviewing your policy.

Remember that whilst every pupil has a right to a full-time education and high attendance expectations should be set for all pupils, the attendance policy should account for the specific needs of certain pupils and pupil cohorts. Your policy should be applied fairly and consistently but in doing so schools should always consider the individual needs of pupils and their families who have specific barriers to attendance.

To be truly effective, your attendance policy is about how your school brings attendance to life; it is not a policy that remains static on a shelf.

Barriers to attendance and drivers of absence change quickly and so the attendance policy needs to be regularly reviewed, seeking the views of pupils and parents.

The policy should be sent to parents any initial information when pupils join the school and reminded of it at the beginning of each school year and when it is updated.

Within this article we will explore the expectations of the Government's 'Working Together to Improve Attendance' guidance and detail what schools must include in their attendance policy.

The introduction section of your attendance policy should set out what good attendance is and what your school's expectations are to ensure that your pupils can achieve this. You should explain how regular attendance at school is vital for children to be successful and achieve their full potential, as well as the safeguarding concerns that poor attendance presents.

The whole policy needs to be written in a way that is accessible to your community, considering the reading age of your parents and avoiding any unnecessary jargon. Avoid 'legal jargon'. Keep it simple and linked to what you want to happen, why and who to go to.

Your attendance policy must be available on your website, in a location that is clear and easy to find.

1. The attendance and punctuality expectations of pupils and parents, including start and close of the day, register closing times and the processes for requesting leaves of absence and informing the school of the reason for an unexpected absence.

This section relates to your school's daily routines – these are your school's daily processes in relation to managing attendance, including:

- The key times of the school day – the gate opening, when children can enter the building, when they can come onto the playground.

- Register opening and closing times, length of time of the form period or first lesson. Be very explicit and clear.
- Your procedures and timings for managing punctuality, including the use of L and U codes (including detail for afternoon sessions), where pupils go when they are late, how they get their register mark, and what your expectation is of parents.
- Arrangements around breakfast club and/or other morning wraparound care provision if you have them and how parents can access this.
- How and when parents are expected to contact school to report reasons for absence, including the contact methods that you accept. Make it explicit and simple.
- Processes for requesting leaves of absence. What do you want them to do to request it? Is there a standard form you use? Set out how you review them. Be clear you do not adopt a blanket approach, but you only authorise leave in term time in exceptional circumstances.
- Perhaps some examples of what is considered an authorised absence (and what is not)
- If and how these processes differ for pupils of non-compulsory school age

2. The name and contact details of the school's Senior Attendance Champion.

3. Information and contact details of the school staff who pupils and parents should contact about attendance on a day to day basis and for more detailed support on attendance.

Your policy needs to detail the key members of staff with responsibility for attendance, including the link Governor for attendance. Firstly, the name and contact details of the school's Senior Attendance Champion, who is most often the Headteacher or Deputy Headteacher, and how you would want parents to contact them and what their role is in relation to attendance.

You must also include information and contact details of the school staff who pupils and parents should contact about attendance on a day-to-day basis (such as a class teacher, form tutor, attendance officer etc) and for more detailed support on attendance (such as an education welfare officer, head of year, pastoral lead or family liaison officer etc). Again be clear and simple in how this is set out. Do you want parents to talk to the form or class tutor, or a named person for attendance? What is your process?

Here you could detail the support that these members of staff can provide, and how parents can access this. Consider how this links to your pastoral and early help work. Make it clear who is who and what they do in relation to attendance.

You may wish to consider including photographs so that these key staff are easily identifiable to parents.

4. The school's day to day processes for managing attendance, for example first day calling and processes to follow up on unexplained absence.

This is a vital part of the policy which details the escalation procedures that a school will follow should attendance become a cause for concern.

Attendance and safeguarding are intrinsically linked and your attendance policy should reflect your safeguarding and child protection policy. There are two elements to consider here: first day calling processes and longer-term attendance monitoring.

Parents need to be made aware of the expectations that the school has for reporting absence and what happens if they do not follow the expectations laid out in the first section.

Schools have a responsibility to make efforts to contact parents to investigate reasons for absence, including completing home visits where contact cannot be made by telephone. Many schools have internal systems that prioritise vulnerable pupils for early first day contact and/or home visits. You need to detail who will make contact with parents (and other family members who have their contact details listed on the school's MIS in some cases), how and when.

Safe and Well checks

Your policy needs to clearly state when a member of staff will undertake a home visit if a satisfactory reason for absence is not provided and give the reasons for this. It is important that these visits take place and that parents are clear that they form part of the safeguarding requirements that schools must adhere to.

Parents also need to be made aware that contact may be made with other agencies working with the family (such as Strengthening Families practitioners, social workers etc) to explore reasons for absence where there are significant concerns.

5. How the school is promoting and incentivising good attendance.

This section is concerned with how you incentivise attendance. This includes good attendance over time but should also cover how improved attendance is celebrated. Schools have different systems and this section will be very tailored to your own processes. Policy content will include how these rewards and incentives are utilised at an individual, class and whole school level, explained in a simple manner but clearly detailing the criteria for them to be awarded.

In addition, you may wish to include how the school uses key events (such as assemblies, parents' evenings, transition meetings etc) to continually drip-feed and reiterate the important messages around attendance.

6. The school's strategy for using data to target attendance improvement efforts to the pupils or pupil cohorts who need it most.

As part of your longer-term attendance monitoring, the school community need to know what is considered to be good attendance over time. It is important to also translate the percentage thresholds into the number of days and/or lessons missed; percentages alone often skew people's perceptions on how good or bad attendance is. You may wish to include visuals to map out the expectations in a graduated RAG rating system so the entire community can easily see where you expect children's attendance to be, as well as where staff would consider it appropriate to intervene. Many schools have attendance percentage ladders or colour coded grids to show what is considered good or a concern; insert them here. It makes it easier for parents to understand what the figures actually mean.

Schools are expected to make patterns of absence a focus of their regular data monitoring and identify pupils and cohorts who need targeted attendance support as quickly as possible. Both persistent and severe absence should be central to school strategies. The policy should detail how the school utilises regular data tracking to monitor attendance; this could include how regularly you review the registers to identify pupils who are persistently or severely absent, or at risk of becoming so, and how you will follow up if you have a concern. Be clear about what you do strategically and what you do in relation to identifying those pupils who may be in need of support or intervention.

The policy should detail how you monitor the school's overall headline attendance statistics in comparison to available local and national figures, for benchmarking and setting ambitious targets for attendance. Monitoring and comparison should include specific vulnerable groups (such as EAL, PPG, FSM, SEND, EHCP, gender, CiC/CiN, CP, Young Carers) to target attendance improvement efforts to the pupil cohorts who need it most. Remember to be clear that you are ambitious for all your pupils.

7. The school's strategy for reducing persistent and severe absence, including how access to wider support services will be provided to remove the barriers to attendance and when support will be formalised in conjunction with the local authority.

Parents need to know how you as a school will respond to attendance that drops below the school's identified level for intervention. Your actions will differ from other schools and this section should reflect what you do in practice, ensuring that it is rooted in the 'support first' principles of 'Working Together to Improve Attendance'.

Many schools choose to communicate concerns around attendance through both SALs and face to face Attendance Support/Concern Meetings (ASMs/ACMs) with various school staff. Set out what you do and what might trigger a concern. Further intervention could involve signposting to in-school early help to explore the reasons for absence and to identify support needs. This could include in-school staff such as educational welfare officers, pastoral teams, counsellors, ELSAs or to school services such as breakfast club, wraparound care and the walking bus. The Ofsted framework is clear that schools should '*listen, understand, empathise and support – but do not tolerate*'. Schools may explain their use of attendance action plans or agreements to document the support offer that is agreed.

Should the in-school early help not be sufficient to achieve improvement, parents should be made aware that they may be referred to external services (such as completing an Early Help Assessment, referrals to BSAT, Educational Psychologists, Social Care etc). Your policy should explain that interventions such as these are considered on an individual case-by-case basis and will be undertaken in partnership with families.

8. Details of the National Framework for Penalty Notices and when Notices to Improve, penalty notices or other legal interventions will be sought if support is not appropriate (e.g. for a holiday in term time), not successful, or not engaged with.

'Working Together to Improve Attendance' makes it clear that absence is often a symptom of wider issues a family is facing, and so schools, trusts and local authorities should always work together with other local partners to understand the barriers to attendance and provide support. Within this section, schools should make clear that staff are keen to work with parents to improve

their child's attendance - we know that the greatest attendance success is found where all parties know their role and work together towards the common goal – and parents need to view early interventions for attendance as supportive and purposeful.

However, parents must also understand that a lack of engagement and/or improvement through this early help and support will result in a referral to the Local Authority's Attendance Support Team. The school's policy should make it clear that the law protects pupils' right to an education and provides a range of legal interventions to formalise attendance improvement efforts and, where all other avenues have been exhausted, enforce it through prosecuting parents. Attendance legal intervention can only be used for pupils of compulsory school age and decisions should be made on an individual case-by-case basis.

The policy needs to be clear that accruing regular unauthorised absence could result in the issue of a penalty notice or other legal intervention.

State explicitly that the National Threshold means that all state funded schools must consider whether a penalty notice is appropriate in each individual case where one of their pupils reaches the threshold for considering a penalty notice. It is not a blanket approach of issuing or not issuing a penalty notice and judgements are on an individual case by case basis. The threshold is 10 sessions of unauthorised absence in a rolling period of 10 school weeks. Where that threshold has been met, the school is expected to consider whether support would be appropriate in this case. Explain that if the answer is yes, you will draw upon the early help you have outlined. If it is no, for example a holiday in term time, a penalty notice can be issued. School will need to consider if a penalty notice is the best available tool to improve attendance and change parental behaviour of this particular family, or whether support or one of the other legal interventions might be more appropriate. Finally, as a school you will consider whether issuing a penalty notice in this case is appropriate after considering any obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

The Local Authority have a range of legal interventions that can be utilised, including attendance contracts, education supervision orders (ESOs), parenting orders, attendance prosecution and penalty notices. The specific strategy used will be agreed between the Attendance Support Team and the school on a case-by-case basis. AST are developing templates for schools to consider using parenting contracts and all interventions will be reviewed periodically.

In summary, your school's attendance policy should be;

- a '**user manual**' for parents, staff and pupils
- **tailored** and **personalised** to cover what your school does as its processes and procedures for attendance.

The DfE are clear that it is not meaningful for Local Authorities to share a model or template policy as every school's policy will differ slightly in terms of the specifics of their own practices.

However, all schools do have the same high expectations of staff and parents to work in partnership to support pupils to attend school regularly, punctually and well prepared for learning.

AST's Attendance Advisors Jo Antenbring and Karen Parkinson will be happy to review individual updated draft attendance policies during your upcoming Targeted Support Meetings and some schools have already utilised the meetings to do this.