

Helping pupils return to school:

strategies for improving attendance

Summary for school leaders and senior attendance champions

Absence is a growing concern in secondary schools. While illness is still a leading cause, a wider set of barriers is making it harder for some pupils to attend - especially after a period away.

In a series of interviews and focus groups, the National Foundation For Educational Research (NFER) spoke to 85 pupils and 22 school staff across nine mainstream secondary schools with strong or improving attendance. We wanted to understand how schools are supporting pupils to return.

In this summary, we highlight some key strategies and actions that you might consider in your school.

Why are pupils missing school?

As you might expect, staff and pupils told us that absence is rarely down to a single issue. While many absences are related to illness, wider research suggests that mental health challenges, family circumstances, school experience and changing parental attitudes all play a part.

“It got harder to come back the longer I was away.”
Pupil

Pupils said they often felt anxious about returning - worried about being behind in lessons, explaining their absence, or reconnecting socially, and this increased the longer they had been off.



What does wider research say?

Wider studies and national data suggest:

- Over half of absences are due to illness, and this is still above pre-pandemic levels (DfE, 2024).
- Pupil mental health needs have grown, alongside long waits for specialist support.
- Feeling unsafe, bullied, or disengaged at school can reduce motivation to attend.
- Term-time holidays have increased, with rising costs and shifting attitudes since the Covid-19 pandemic.

These insights are drawn from national statistics and published research. See our full report for source details.





What helps pupils return to school?

Across the schools that participated in this research, six themes emerged across successful approaches to helping pupils return from absence and re-engage with learning - many of which will probably resonate with you. We recognise that some of these approaches could increase workload and take additional resources:

1 Supportive relationships matter

School staff told us that a supportive school environment is essential for encouraging attendance. Pupils are more likely to return when they feel safe, valued, and understood by staff.

“It comes down to the individuality of the pupil and their needs... we look at the underlying issues for each child.”
Attendance Lead

Actions to consider:

- Prioritise supportive, individualised approaches to addressing pupil absence, while recognising that sanctions still have a role to play.
- Create a welcoming environment and build positive relationships with pupils and their parents/carers to encourage attendance and support returns after absence.

2 Take early, proactive steps

School staff told us that identifying absence patterns early and communicating effectively with families can prevent prolonged disengagement. Schools reported seeing better attendance outcomes where they acted quickly and offered non-judgemental support.

“The school carries out home visits every day. The safeguarding and attendance team constantly track where children are. [These actions tell] the parents, ‘we care about you’.”

Headteacher

Actions to consider:

- Regularly monitor attendance data and engage families proactively, for example through regular meetings, workshops, and home visits.
- Deploy dedicated staff to check in with pupils and take time to welcome them back after absence.
- Understanding the barriers to attendance and offering practical guidance on how parents and carers can support their child in attending more regularly may also be beneficial.

3 Reintegration needs to be structured and sensitive

Pupils told us that the longer they were absent, the harder it became to return to school. Key challenges included:

- Anxiety about catching up on missed work.
- Fear of being questioned by peers or staff about their absence, especially if they had been absent for a personal/sensitive reason.
- Changes in friendship dynamics, making social reintegration difficult.

“The teachers will notice if something is going on. And they will ask you, like, just to make sure that everything is ok.”
Pupil

Actions to consider:

Schools should consider implementing structured re-entry support for absent pupils, while balancing workload demands and available resources. This could include:

- Designated staff checking in with returning pupils.
- Sensitivity around questioning pupils about their absence, ensuring discussions take place privately where needed.

4 Academic support reduces stress

Pupils told us that they worried about falling behind with schoolwork after an absence. Ensuring that pupils can catch up on missed work reduces anxiety about returning.

“We have Google classroom so teachers will put on what we’ve missed during the lessons.”

Pupil

Actions to consider:

- Develop clear systems for accessing missed work, such as online learning platforms or teacher-led catch-up sessions.



5 Belonging boosts attendance

School staff said that making attendance a shared responsibility between staff, pupils, and families helps build a culture where coming to school is valued. Recognising and celebrating improvements can be particularly motivating. Wider research suggests that helping pupils feel they belong at school may also improve attendance and support learning.

“I think ultimately, it’s really about creating that sense of belonging. I think that’s the magic key to unlocking attendance”

Senior Leader

Actions to consider:

- Combine rewards with appropriate sanctions to reinforce attendance expectations.
- Schools that haven’t already done so could consider adopting the DfE’s [whole-school wellbeing principles](#).

6 Talk about mental health carefully

School staff told us that mental health concerns, particularly anxiety, were a significant barrier to attendance. They also found it more difficult to support these pupils to return to school.

Staff also talked about the importance of the language used around mental health. They noted that while some pupils experienced significant anxiety that hindered their ability to attend school, others faced everyday challenges and setbacks but viewed them as major barriers to attendance.

“We’ve had examples of where the students are so riddled with anxiety, they can’t even put their uniform on. So we’ve tried an approach where they put their uniform on, and they sat in their mum’s car, and then go back into the house. The next day they drive to the school car park and then go back to the house. And we’ve done this slowly and tailored to the needs of the children.”

Senior Leader

Actions to consider:

- Training staff to increase their knowledge of mental health.
- Encourage nuanced conversation with parents and pupils about developing coping strategies and building resilience.
- Training for staff to help them recognise when professional mental health support is needed.





How we did this research

This study involved:



9 secondary schools in England, selected for strong or improving attendance



22 staff interviews, including senior leaders and attendance/pastoral leads



85 pupil voices, gathered through focus groups



606 secondary teachers, who shared insights through NFER's Teacher Voice Survey

The findings offer practical recommendations but should be interpreted with caution due to the small, self-selected sample and the absence of direct links to pupil outcomes. Schools should adapt suggestions to their local context. Read more about our methodology in the [full report](#).



Find out more

Read the full report: [Voices from the classroom: Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence](#). To be the first to receive future Research Bites from NFER Classroom, sign up to our termly newsletter and follow us on social media.



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