SSAT Research Summary and Synthesis

Post-2019 Research on Attendance and Punctuality

February 2024



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Introduction

This research summary presents an overview of the key insights, findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the array of evidence-informed reports that have been published about pupil attendance and punctuality to school since 2019.

Readers should note that some of the reports referenced in this publication have been paraphrased or shortened for the sake of brevity and clarity. All reports shown are publicly available and, for the sake of transparency, links to them have been included in the footnotes of each page. The links are correct at the time of publication.

The final page of this document offers a suggested synthesis of the key findings and recommendations emerging from these reports. This is based upon recurring insights presented across these reports into school attendance.

As has been widely discussed, the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly altered the patterns of school attendance nationally and for all types of school and pupil characteristics. Typically, this has seen levels of overall absence running at more than 50% higher in 2022-23 than was the case in the 2018-19 academic year, with the level of persistent absenteeism more than doubling during the same period.

In response to this the Department for Education, government-related agencies, think-tanks, charities, and academic researchers have focused their efforts on making sense of attendance and punctuality. This has led to a very 'busy' evidence landscape which, while helpful to practitioners in schools, is also a significant demand on their attention and capacity for acting to improving their pupils' attendance.

In pulling this evidence base together, SSAT hopes to help school leaders and staff gain an oversight of the research landscape. For each publication mentioned, the footnotes include links to the relevant document so that colleagues in schools can delve deeper into the research findings that speak most resonantly to their vision, values, aims, intentions, and action planning documents.

This evidence base also serves to inform the work that we are doing at SSAT to support schools, their leaders and their staff in Improving Whole School Attendance and Punctuality through our audit and evaluation processes.

Please contact us to find out how we can help you and your school community.

Published March 2024

This resource has been compiled by Keven Bartle, Senior Education Lead, SSAT

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Contents

Introduction	2
Ofsted – *Inspection Handbook* – January 2024	4
Ofsted – *Securing Good Attendance and Tackling Persistent Absence* – February 2022	5-6
Department for Education – *Working Together to Improve School Attendance* – May 2022	7-8
Department for Education – *Toolkit for schools: Communicating with families to support attendance* - September 2023	9
Department for Education – *School attendance hubs*	10-11
Education Endowment Foundation – *Attendance Interventions: Rapid Evidence Assessment* – March 2022	12-15
Education Endowment Foundation – *Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning* – Guidance Report	16
Children's Commissioner – Reports on attendance in 2022 and 2023	17-18
Children's Commissioner – other resources	18
Public First – *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis* – September 2023	19
NESTA – *School attendance: analysing causes and impact in pursuit of solutions* – November 2023	20
The Centre for Social Justice – *The Missing Link: Restoring the bond between schools and families* – January 2024	21
ImpactED – *Understanding Attendance: Findings on the drivers of pupil absence* – January 2024	22
Selected academic research papers on attendance since 2019	23-26

Moodley, R. et al. (2020) *'Using data mining in educational administration: A case study on improving school attendance'.* Applied Sciences, Vol 10(9), p.3116.

Finning, K. et al. (2020) *'Secondary school practitioners' beliefs about risk factors for school attendance problems: a qualitative study'.* Emotional and behavioural difficulties, Vol 25(1), pp.15-28.

Eklund, K., et al (2022) *'Addressing chronic absenteeism in schools: A meta-analysis of evidence-based interventions'.* School Psychology Review, Vol. 51(1), pp.95-111

Kearney, C.A. et al (2022) *'School attendance and school absenteeism: A primer for the past, present, and theory of change for the future'.* In Frontiers in Education (Vol. 7)

Klein, M. & Sosu, E. M. (2023) *'School attendance and academic achievement: understanding variation across family socioeconomic status'.* American Sociological Association. pp.1-18.

McDonald, B. et al (2023) *'School attendance problems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – A multiple stakeholder qualitative study with parents and professionals'.* British Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 93(1), pp.386-401.

SSAT's 'best bets' for school attendance leads: *What schools can learn from recent research findings on attendance and punctuality*	27

Ofsted

School inspection handbook - January 2024[1]

303. Inspectors will expect schools to do all they reasonably can to achieve the highest possible attendance, while recognising that the context in which schools operate has changed.

304. Inspectors will expect schools to have done an analysis of absence and persistent absence rates for all pupils, and for different groups, compared with the published local and national averages for all pupils. This includes the extent to which pupils with persistent and severe absence are improving their attendance over time or whether attendance is consistently low. Inspectors will want to see this analysis and how this has fed in to the school's approach.

305. Where attendance is not consistently at or above what could reasonably be expected, inspectors will expect attendance to be a high priority for leaders and for it to be improving towards and beyond national, pre-pandemic levels. There should be a strong understanding of the causes of absence (particularly for persistent and severe absence) and a clear strategy in place that takes account of those causes to improve attendance for all pupils. In some cases of persistent and all cases of severe absence, schools should make efforts to engage in multi-agency work with the local authority and other partners.

306. Where leaders are aware of the issues affecting attendance and have a clear, strategic plan of action in place but attendance for all pupils is not yet consistently very high, inspectors should judge this favourably, as long as there is a track record of improvement that demonstrates leaders' capacity to continue to improve attendance.

Good judgment criteria:

- There is demonstrable improvement in the behaviour and attendance of pupils who have particular needs.
- Pupils have high attendance. They come to school on time and are punctual to lessons. When this is not the case, the school takes appropriate, swift and effective action.

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook-for-september-2023#grade-descriptors-for-evaluating-behaviour-and-attitudes

Ofsted

Securing good attendance and tackling persistent absence - February 2022[2]

Evidence base: HMI and primary leader focus groups, conversation with secondary leaders, inspection evidence, survey of schools.

Features of best practice

Summarised as **"Listen, understand, empathise and support – but do not tolerate."**

High expectations; clear and consistent communication; set expectations from start; explain importance to parents; listen to parents to inform action; challenge and offer support to parents; right people in place for these conversations; ensure accurate recording; systematically analyse data for patterns and trends; use data to inform action for individuals and whole school; ensure attendance is "everyone's business"; see attendance as part of a wider context in school (e.g. curriculum); push for improvement beyond national averages; securing good attendance seen as a process not an event.

Post-lockdown barriers – Systematically removed, not dismissed; sensitively analysed; challenge parental anxieties; provide adjustments.

Parental communication – Part of trusting relationships; honesty and tough messages (overt, straight-talking, spelling it out); clarity on parental responsibility; help to achieve good routines; challenge misconceptions of 'good' attendance; explaining non-authorisation of TT absence; exemplify real impact of absence (e.g. GCSE lessons missed; tenacity in not letting go; patience and a movement to celebrating positives).

Expectations of pupils – Very important for older pupils; leaders communicating wanting pupils to be in school and expectations; start of day and positive greeting of pupils by HTs and DHTs; noticing presence of PA students; making links between attendance and outcomes (not just exams); overt links to careers and citizenship; rewarding attendance and improvements.

Finding out issues – Two-way discussion; understanding the family behind attendance; identifying common issues (ambivalence about EYFS attendance; parents' school experience; seeing 90% as good attendance) poor routines for punctuality at home; secondary students refusing parental exhortation; older pupils non-attendance impacting younger siblings; pupils as young carers; financial barriers in family; pupil anxiety and parental anxieties; listening and prioritising the tackling of easier challenges first; comprehensive pastoral support.

Right people in place – Professional learning for frontline staff (e.g. primary class teacher, secondary form tutor) for challenging conversations; ensuring support for incisive conversation; ensuring there is a constant contact person for more challenging attendance patterns.

Noticing patterns – Systematic analysis of information; noticing patterns, especially in secondary schools; finding questions to explore complex patterns; considering likely school and friendship factors alongside possible home and family factors.

2. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence/securing-good-attendance-and-tackling-persistent-absence

Importance of ambition – Similar approach to safeguarding as "everybody's business all of the time"; noticing and following up absence; promoting attendance; high attendance as part of school's ambition; ethos of making school safe with a curriculum worth learning and lessons worth attending; meeting needs of SEND; teaching positive behaviours; anti-bullying prominent; celebrating successes with students and parents (including improvements); workshops with parents; stressing the importance of punctuality and attendance to all lessons.

Role of governors – Fine-grained data analysis and comparators to national (not just overall pattern across school); ensuring support for robust stance on attendance with parents.

Weaknesses in tackling absence – Common factors include inaccurate data on attendance (recording and coding); an over-emphasis on 'knowing students' linked to lack of systematic data analysis; lack of a coherent strategy to weave together different actions; using poorly planned or evaluation part-time timetables (especially for SEND and behaviour issues); lack of urgency in tackling attendance (e.g. waiting until below 90%).

Tackling persistent absence – Getting the basics right for all students; noticing students who are often not there; persistence; changing narrative from 'hard to reach' to 'easy to ignore' families; working with partner schools serving family's children; individualising approaches; not assuming the basics are in place in families; recognise small improvements in attendance; breaking down expectations rather than lowering them; supporting students returning from prolonged absences; working with other agencies.

Department for Education

Working together to improve school attendance - May 2022[3]

The pupils with the highest attainment at the end of key stage 2 and key stage 4 have higher rates of attendance over the key stage compared to those with the lowest attainment.

- At KS2, pupils not meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths had an absence rate of 4.7%, compared to 3.5% among those meeting the expected standard.
- Moreover, the overall absence rate of pupils not meeting the expected standard was higher than among those meeting the higher standard (4.7% compared to 2.7%).
- At KS4, pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 in English and maths had an overall absence rate of 8.8%, compared to 5.2% among those achieving grade 4.
- The overall absence rate of pupils not achieving grade 9 to 4 was over twice as high as those achieving grade 9 to 5 (8.8% compared to 3.7%).

For the most vulnerable pupils, regular attendance is also an important protective factor and the best opportunity for needs to be identified and support provided. Research has shown associations between regular absence from school and extra-familial harms. This includes crime (90% of young offenders had been persistently absent) and serious violence (83% of knife possession offenders had been persistently absent in at least one of the five years of study).

EXPECT – MONITOR – LISTEN & UNDERSTAND – FACILITATE & FORMALISE SUPPORT – ENFORCE

Expectation: Proactive improvement of attendance as the foundation for outcomes; everyone's responsibility; consistent promotion of benefits of attendance; set high expectations of every pupil; communicate consistently; systematically analyse data to identify patterns and target efforts; work effectively with partners to overcome barriers; school as safe and orderly and a place students want to come to learn.

- Develop and maintain a whole school culture that promotes the benefits of high attendance.
- Have a clear school attendance policy which all staff, pupils and parents understand.
- Accurately complete admission and attendance registers and have effective day to day processes in place to follow-up absence.
- Regularly monitor and analyse attendance and absence data to identify pupils or cohorts that require support with their attendance and put effective strategies in place.
- Build strong relationships with families, listen to and understand barriers to attendance and work with families to remove them.
- Share information and work collaboratively with other schools in the area, local authorities, and other partners when absence is at risk of becoming persistent or severe.

3. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1099677/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance.pdf

Culture: Central to vision; linked to other improvement plans; designated senior leader; other staff in line with expectations; resourcing support; communicating high expectations; visibly demonstrating benefits of attendance; continuous improvement process; emphasising links to safeguarding.

Policy: Clear written policy based on this guidance; expectations for all; sharing details of SL lead; details of daily attendance workers; processes for managing absence; how school promotes and incentivises attendance; data strategy for targeting absence; strategy for reducing persistent and severe absence; clarity on when sanctions will be issued; account for needs of specific pupils and cohorts; easily accessible and on website; reviewed often and with stakeholders.

Accurate processes: Admissions, daily attendance, keeping data, exceptional leave of absence; robust processes for tracking and following up daily absence and poor punctuality, rigorously applied across school; processes that meet needs of pupils and context; length of time for keeping registers open (same for all sessions and not more than 30 mins); first day absence expectations of parents and follow up for staff; further contact beyond first day for safeguarding; identify unexplained absence and contact families for explanations; hold emergency contacts; regularly inform parents about sessions missed; hold regular meetings with parents of vulnerable student and those with persistent/severe absence; identify early pupils in need of further support and referral; make statutory returns; support return from lengthy absences.

Data analysis: Weekly attendance patterns and trends (individuals, cohorts and context specific groups over overall percentages) for targeted intervention and support; attendance within sessions to ensure students attend all lessons; regular report to teachers and tutors as well as leaders; identify student and focus efforts of all staff; thorough analysis of data for half-terms/terms/school year (pupils, cohorts, codes, days, subjects); benchmark against local and regional/national datasets; devise specific strategies to respond to datasets; use ensuing data to monitor the impact of improvement efforts and next steps; using data to inform governance.

Family relationships: Dignity and respect; links to attainment and wellbeing foregrounded; challenge misconceptions of good attendance; consistent links where family support needed; listen to and understand barriers; school as place of safety over punitive measures; address in-school barriers, intervene through referrals and agencies to address external barriers (alternate provision, early help, legal routes); formal support (fixed penalty notices, raise safeguarding concerns, prosecution); monitor interventions and adjust or change as necessary.

Medical conditions and SEND: High standards but mindful of barriers to identify additional support; making reasonable adjustments; EHCP provision; timely referrals to external agencies; ensuring that approaches are specific to needs identified; mitigation of necessary time out of school (e.g. medical reasons); sensitivity and avoiding stigmatising pupils.

Part-time timetabling: Very exceptional circumstances (e.g. medical); never for behaviour; in place for shortest time possible; time limited; formal review arrangements with families.

Working with other stakeholders: Legal requirement to share with local authority changes to admissions and unauthorised absence of ten days or more.

Department for Education

Toolkit for schools: Communicating with families to support attendance - September 2023[4]

Communicating with parents about attendance

- Timely, regular and early, using child's name and specific, not generalised, information
- Framing absence in terms of lessons missed, not percentages
- Using the school attendance data tool link
- Positive, future-focused messages, e.g. about wellbeing, social benefits over academic
- Providing specific contact details and clear reminders of policies and guidance
- Firm, factual, empathic tone rather than generalised feelings or unrealistic claims
- Working with other schools serving same children in families
- Alternatives to letters for families who might struggle to understand written information

Methods: Setting expectations early (start of year); regular communication (termly) about pupil's attendance; accurate information using attendance tool; transparent about policy and trigger points for interventions; inclusive and non-judgmental messages; considerate of possible additional needs of parents; individual messages more effective than general ones; emails better for general messages and letters for specific ones; links on website to signpost to other support information and agencies; text messages for information specific to the child; calls preferred for personal conversations about child (by someone who knows the child); face-to-face meetings for sensitive or serious issues and video calls where parent cannot attend these; involving child to help build confidence and to aid their understanding of importance of issues.

4. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-improve-school-attendance/toolkit-for-schools-communicating-with-families-to-support-attendance

Department for Education

School attendance hubs[5]

Schools who have joined an attendance hub are expected to:

1. Commit to implement changes to their attendance practice through the hub.
2. Have a nominated senior leader who will join half-termly hub meetings.
3. Be an active member of the hub and hub discussions, and for the nominated senior leader to contribute to the wider group effort to improve school attendance in all schools represented.
4. Share practice with others including actions taken that have significantly reduced absence in their school.
5. Support the hubs programme by providing regular feedback to the hub lead school about what is working and engage with DfE to share attendance progress since joining the hub.
6. Sign up to the DfE pilot school attendance data collection.

Hub lead schools are expected to:

1. Act as an attendance improvement leader for the hub, explaining the shared attendance challenge facing member schools, how the hub will work, and setting a positive ambitious tone.
2. Collate and develop a set of key attendance materials and resources that will be shared with other hub schools.
3. Present the resources and talk through their approach and ethos in the initial hub meetings, and introduce the focus of the hub.
4. Chair virtual hub meetings, and then be involved in overseeing and participating in ongoing hub meetings on a half-termly basis.
5. Support participating hub schools to make changes to their practice and improve their attendance.
6. Where appropriate, host visits for school leaders in their hub.

Cycle of hub meetings:

- First introductory hub meeting. This will be an opportunity for hub members to meet, and for the lead hub school to set out its approach to improving attendance. The lead school will also introduce its approach to managing attendance and share relevant resources.
- Second hub meeting. As part of this meeting, participating schools will be able to ask questions about the resources introduced in the first meeting. They will also commit to take forward changes to their attendance approach and report back on progress in future meetings.
- Third hub meeting. This will include discussion of a key element of attendance practice on a rotating basis (eg, effective use of data, working with the local authority, building a strong culture of attendance etc.). As part of the meeting, several schools will also discuss progress to date in implementing their new attendance practice. There will also be an opportunity for review and to consider if further changes need to be made.
- Fourth hub meeting.
- Fifth hub meeting.
- Sixth hub meeting. Final hub meeting. This final meeting will be an opportunity to reflect on progress made over the last 12 months, successes, ongoing and revisit commitments made in the initial meetings.

5. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6569af115936bb000d31682f/Expectations_for_schools_joining_attendance_hubs.pdf

Named attendance hub schools (14 as of December 2023)

- North Shore Academy, Northern Education Trust – STOCKTON-ON-TEES
- Bar Hill Community Primary School, Meridian Trust - CAMBRIDGE
- Wallscourt Farm Academy, Cabot Learning Federation - BRISTOL
- Abbots Green Primary Academy, Unity Schools Partnership – BURY ST EDMONDS
- Willows Academy, Delta Academies Trust - GRIMSBY
- Eden Boys School, STAR Academies - BOLTON
- Ely College, Meridian Trust - ELY
- St Edward's Church of England Academy, Unity Schools Partnership - ROMFORD
- Olive Academies, alternative provision trust - CAMBRIDGE
- River Tees Academies, alternative provision trust - MIDDLESBROUGH
- St Giles Special School - DERBY
- John Whitgift Academy - GRIMSBY
- Ridgeway School and Sixth Form - SWINDON
- The Croft Primary School – SWINDON

18 more attendance hub schools announced on 08 January 2024, published in *Schools Week*[6].

- Ark Priory Primary Academy - LONDON
- Galliard Primary School - LONDON
- Noel Park Primary School - LONDON
- The Beacon Church of England Primary School - LIVERPOOL
- St Bede's Catholic Academy – STOCKTON-ON-TEES
- Tidemill Academy - BURTON-UPON-TRENT
- Forest Academy - CROYDON
- Ashington Academy - ASHINGTON
- Bedford Free School - BEDFORD
- Bluecoat Wollaton Academy - NOTTINGHAM
- Denbigh High School - LUTON
- Drayton Manor High School - LONDON
- Landau Forte College - DERBY
- Mulberry Academy Shoreditch- LONDON
- St Paul's Way Trust School - LONDON
- The Hurlingham Academy- LONDON
- The Khalsa Academy - WOLVERHAMPTON
- Wright Robinson College - MANCHESTER

6. https://schoolsweek.co.uk/18-new-attendance-hubs-to-help-2000-schools-cut-absence/

Education Endowment Foundation

Attendance Interventions: Rapid Evidence Assessment – March 2022[7]

Overall conclusions

1. There is large variation in the strategies that have been researched with the aim of improving pupil attendance.
2. The overall quality of evidence is weak, and more research is required.
3. Some evidence of promise for strategies including parental engagement approaches and responsive interventions that target individual causes of low attendance.
4. Many interventions did not have sufficient evidence for conclusions on effectiveness.

Mentoring

- Pairing young people with an older peer or adult, who acts as a positive role model.
- Aims to build confidence and relationships, to develop resilience and character, or raise aspirations, rather than to develop specific academic skills or knowledge.
- Targeted at risk pupils that were chronically absent from school, and in some cases were at risk of drop-out or not graduating from high school.
- Meeting with them one to one for about an hour a week over a sustained period, either during school, at the end of the school day, or at weekends.

Findings and implications

- The picture is mixed in terms of the impact of mentoring programmes on pupil attendance. However, there is a high risk of bias across most of the included studies.
- Two RCTs, each that were rated as having some concerns due to small sample size and bias rising from the allocation process, found positive impacts on attendance.
- All studies compared outcomes for pupils receiving a school-based mentoring intervention to a group of pupils who experienced no mentoring.
- All included studies took place in schools in the USA. Research is needed to understand the impact of mentoring programmes in England.

Parental engagement

- Involve parents in supporting and encouraging their children to attend school: communication and targeted planning support with family members and/or guardians.
- Aims of these interventions are that greater awareness or eradicating misconceptions will lead to guardians' taking a more active role in improving their student's attendance.
- Typically, communication about attendance state the importance of attendance and add in specific information about the child's attendance history.
- Targeted parental engagement interventions are responsive and involve discussions with parents to gain information about reasons for low attendance and collaboratively planning support students and their families need to overcome attendance barriers.

7. https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/pages/Attendance-REA-report.pdf?v=1704851619

Findings and implications

- Very small positive impact, on average for communication parental engagement on attendance and a small positive impact for other parental engagement interventions.
- For communication intervention studies, none were rated as high risk of bias and larger sample sizes were used in comparison to other intervention categories.
- Only one study took place in the UK context. Further research is required to see if these interventions have a positive impact on attendance in English schools.

Responsive and targeted approaches to attendance

- Not a specified "intervention" but instead aim to be responsive to the reasons for low attendance by a pupil. Often multi-component, may involve 1:1 support for the pupil.
- Key characteristic is monitoring and identification of pupils that need support and the reasons for low attendance. Some combine the targeting of barriers with the positive re-enforcement of good behaviour.
- Interventions are delivered by a variety of staff from social workers to teachers.

Findings and implications

- The average impact of responsive and targeted approaches to attendance is positive.
- Small number of studies and very few studies with low risk of bias. More research is required to estimate the impact of these approaches in English schools.
- Common characteristics: staff monitoring of pupil absences, identifying causes of absences and then responsive, individualised interventions that tackle those causes.
- Variation in the people delivering and the intensity of the chosen interventions – some of the approaches had very intensive responses, such as home visits by social workers.

Teaching of social and emotional approaches

- Aim to build social and emotional skills and outcomes that have been shown to be correlated with school attendance (resilience or self-regulation skills).
- Interventions are often delivered by school counsellors or classroom teachers and are delivered either in regular classroom time or as part of school assemblies.
- Interventions identified in this review have targeted goal setting, reducing test anxiety, topics related to self-concept, and others.

Findings and implications

- The average impact of class teaching of social and emotional skills on attendance is small and positive, but high variation between studies (includes negative impacts).
- None of the studies took place in English schools and only two studies were considered to have a low risk of bias.
- While the teaching of social and emotional skills may have other benefits, more research required to understand whether interventions influence attendance.

Behaviour interventions

- Aim to reduce absenteeism through solving school behaviour issues.
- Through reducing individual behaviour problems, they might be more likely to attend school – either through this leading to more positive relationships between pupil and teacher or reducing behavioural referrals and eventual exclusions.
- Behaviour interventions reduce the consequences of bad behaviour on other pupils.

Findings and implications

- Wide variety of approaches mean it is not possible to calculate an average impact for the approaches on attendance.
- Mixed results overall, with some studies reporting/negative findings on attendance. All were rated as having a high risk of bias and results should be treated with caution.
- The small number of studies mean it is not possible to determine whether there are specific characteristics of behaviour interventions that lead to positive impacts.

Meal provision

- Some studies on school breakfast and lunch programmes have sought to identify whether meal provision affects overall school attendance.
- All the studies looked at universal programmes. The most reported rationale for this approach is to reduce the possible stigma experienced by disadvantaged pupils.
- Many reasons why the consumption of a school breakfast or lunch may improve a pupils' experience of school, and subsequently assist good attendance.
    - Nutritional benefits leading to improved health and reduced sickness.
    - Remove a barrier to school engagement for economically disadvantaged pupils.
    - Reduction/removal of a financial burden for less affluent families.
    - Incentive to arrive early to school in the morning, or to remain on site for lunch.

Findings and implications

- Universal breakfast programmes had a null or small positive effect on pupil attendance. Some studies found that impacts were not identifiable in every year of the programme.
- Impact of breakfast provision within the classroom were positive or null. A promising area for future research might be around how to maximise the impact of breakfast clubs.
- One study in England found a non-significant positive result on school attendance.

Incentives and disincentives

- Interventions that encourage pupils to adopt certain behaviours by either offering rewards for good behaviour (incentive) or punishments for poor behaviour (disincentive).
- Underlying the interventions is the idea that pupils can be prompted to sustain good behaviour through extrinsic sources of motivation, including financial rewards/penalties
- Incentive interventions often promised certain rewards to pupils at the start of the academic term or year that would be redeemed at the end of this time window.
- The disincentives used in interventions came mostly in the form of penalties for pupils, and their parents and carers.

Findings and implications

- Most studies increased pupil attendance, but effect size varied in strength/significance. One study found that the punitive approach led to a decrease in attendance.
- Limited evidence that incentive or disincentive interventions increase pupil attendance. Only half of the studies included were found to have a low risk of bias.
- Only one of the studies took place in English schools, but this did not provide an attendance effect size estimate, and therefore presents no indication of impact.

Extracurricular activities

- Additional educational opportunities outside of the regular curriculum.
- Aim to increase student engagement in school which may increase school attendance.
- The review identified seven studies. Interventions included a variety of athletic and non-athletic activities. All extracurricular activities were delivered after school.

Findings and implications

- Limited evidence that extracurricular activities increase pupil attendance. Small number of studies and all considered to have some risk of bias or high risk of bias.
- Five of seven studies reported small positive impact on attendance. Effect sizes varied in strength. Findings need to be read with caution due to small sample/selection bias.
- None of the studies took place in English schools.
- It is difficult to assess the impact of extracurricular activities. More research is required to establish a clear impact on improvements in attendance.

Education Endowment Foundation

Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning – Guidance Report[8]

Although not explicitly about attendance, the EEF's report on working with parents echoes some of the findings of research that will be useful in an attendance context.

Recommendations

- Critically review how you work with parents.
    - Consider the promise and challenges; Focus on the skills you want children to develop at different ages; Review and plan; Support; Monitor.
- Provide practical strategies to support learning at home.
    - Supporting early language and literacy; Homework; Summer reading.
- Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning.
    - Be positive, personalise and link to learning; The age of learners affects the nature of the messages; Consider frequency, timing and audience; Small changes matter; Review existing communication approaches.
- Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed.
    - Target support sensitively; Plan carefully for group-based sessions with parents; Consider home visiting for younger children; Encourage a consistent approach to behaviour.

8. https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/supporting-parents/EEF_Parental_Engagement_Guidance_Report.pdf?v=1704843549

Children's Commisioner

Reports on attendance in 2022 and 2023

New insights into school absence[9] – July 2022

- Most children (60%) had no unauthorised absence in the autumn 2021 term.
- 14% had a of both a multi-day period of unauthorised absence and several one-off days.
- Attending the first week of school is a strong indicator that a child will attend school regularly.
- Children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and children receiving pupil premium were more likely to have higher levels of absence than their peers.
- While children in care had similar levels of absence to their peers, when we control for other factors, children in care were slightly less likely to be off school than other children.
- Unauthorised absence is most likely to occur on Mondays and Fridays, with 23% of children in our sample missing at least one Friday in the term for unauthorised reasons.
- Authorised absences began to increase after the second week of the new term and were similarly more likely to occur on Fridays.
- There's a wide variation in the use of specific absence codes.

Children need to feel excited and supported to attend school in the first week in September. Schools need to use the last few weeks of term to ensure that their pupils feel ready for the new school year and have plans in place to support children over the summer to re-engage in education in the autumn.

Schools need to be making full use of their data from the first day of term. Where resources are limited, attendance officers and pastoral teams can target the children who miss one of the first days of term and children who show a pattern of missing days in the middle of the week.

Children should receive an intervention as soon as possible, with the school starting a dialogue with the child and their family as to the underlying reasons for absences and implementing bespoke solutions to support that child back into attending full-time.

Fridays were the most common day for school absence. Schools must work with children/families to highlight the importance of attending school every. Schools could also consider making Fridays more appealing by holding popular clubs or activities at Friday lunch times or after school.

9. https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/07/cc-new-insights-into-school-absence.pdf

Education history and attendance[10] – December 2022

- Children's previous absence history is key to understanding their likelihood of being absent in a new term. Variation in previous absence explained more about variation in autumn and spring 2021-2022 absence than any other observable pupil characteristic.
    - Among pupils who had previously been persistently absent (PA), the rate of PA in autumn and spring of academic year 2021-2022 was 51%, over three times higher than the rate of PA among pupils who hadn't been persistently absent (14%).
    - Among pupils who had previously been persistently unauthorised absent, the rate of persistent unauthorised absence was 33%, compared to 2% among pupils who haven't.
    - Having been persistently absent in a previous year was associated with an additional three days of absence in a term. Having been severely absent in a previous year was associated with an additional 11 days of absence in a term.

Children need to feel excited and supported to attend school in the first week in September.

Making use of data needs to go beyond utilising the current terms attendance data from day one of a new term. Schools must have access to children's previous education, suspension, exclusion and attendance history so that they can plan proactively, even before the start of a new term.

Where schools don't have access to historical data, for example when a child has moved schools, the local authority should work with them collaboratively to share data resources and join up the dots.

Other resources from the Children's Commissioner's Office

Talking about Attendance: What are the issues – Audio files – May 2022

https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/talking-about-attendance/

Voices of England's Missing Children: The findings of the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit – June 2022

https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/09/cc-voices-of-englands-missing-children-june-2022.pdf

Attendance is everyone's business: Children's Commissioner's submission to the persistent absence inquiry – February 2023

https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-response-to-persistent-absence-inquiry.pdf

Looked after children who are not in school – May 2023

https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/cc-lac-not-in-school.pdf

10. https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2022/12/cco-education-history-and-attendance.pdf

Public First

Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis – September 2023[11]

Evidence base: Eight representative focus groups of parents, each with four to eight participants.

Findings

- It is no longer the case that everyday matters – at least from the perspective of parents
- There has been a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between the school system and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum.
- Attendance currently has an 'Other People's Children' challenge.
- The mental health crisis in young people is a huge, compounding issue around attendance.
- Term-time holidays are now entirely socially acceptable across all socioeconomic groups.
- The cost-of-living crisis is driving more families into poverty and this is an underlying driver of poor attendance in families from lower / no income groups.
- Despite popular political and media opinion, the increase in parents working from home is not driving the attendance crisis.
- School level attendance systems feel increasingly draconian to families and yet they are not sufficiently robust or accurate, which undermines the relationship between school and families.
- Sanctions are seen as both irrelevant and antagonistic across all parent groups.

Recommendations

1. There needs to be a review of how schools and the wider education system communicate with parents and the messaging. Parents no longer believe in 'every day matters' messaging.
2. Fines are deeply unpopular with parents across the social spectrum. The efficacy and implementation of fines should be reviewed and potentially abolished.
3. Provide intensive, nuanced support to families for whom attendance is a significant issue. Schools need to be empowered to work with the family to address underlying causes; how, when and by whom parents are spoken to matters hugely.
4. Better joined up working and signposting to the appropriate agencies would ensure that those best placed to offer support were doing so. A clearer understanding of which agencies could and should address wider issues that families are experiencing would also reduce 'school blaming' whereby parents hold schools accountable for all problems in their lives.
5. Improve the accuracy of school-level attendance monitoring systems so that information shared with parents is accurate.
6. Highlight the importance of coding attendance – it is impossible to design strategies without this. Working with schools to ensure attendance data is coded and inputted accurately should be a priority for the Department for Education.
7. Other strains on education system are manifesting in the attendance crisis – better-funded schools will have better attendance.
8. SEND and CAMHS are significant factors in the attendance crisis, investing in these two areas will significantly improve attendance.

11. https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ATTENDANCE-REPORT-V02.pdf

NESTA

School attendance: analysing causes and impact in pursuit of solutions – November 2023[12]

Evidence base: Data analysis of existing data from multiple sources (e.g. DfE, IFS, PISA, Arbor)

Key findings

- While absence disproportionately affects pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, the recent rise in absence has affected pupils from all backgrounds all over the country.
- Rise in absence rates for pupils in the early years of secondary school is a concerning sign that non-attendance habits are developing early and will worsen as pupils progress through school.
- Friday absence rates have increased in recent years. This report found no evidence of a causal link between Friday absences and parents' working from home.
- Deteriorating pupil mental health is likely to be a significant factor, as is changing attitudes among parents and pupils to physical attendance.
- There is no strong connection between known school characteristics and rises in absence during the pandemic.
- A small number of schools have bucked the trend and managed to reduce absence in very challenging circumstances. Their approaches may be key to tackling school attendance rates.
- The rise in absence is likely to have a profound impact on educational attainment and long-term outcomes for a huge number of children.

Recommendations for policymakers

1. Do more to examine the root causes of absence and build the evidence base on what works to reduce it.
2. Gain a greater understanding of pupils' and parents' shifting attitudes towards school.
3. Use behavioural science insights, including social norms messaging, to build pupil networks that can improve behaviour and increase attendance.
4. Use data to identify and pre-emptively support at-risk pupils.
5. Learn from the small number of schools who have managed to reduce absence during and after the pandemic.

12. https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/school-attendance-analysing-causes-and-impact-in-pursuit-of-solutions/full/

The Centre for Social Justice

The Missing Link: Restoring the bond between schools and families – January 2024[13]

Evidence base: Poll of 1206 parents of children aged between 5 and 16 years enrolled in schools.

Key findings

- School is still seen as important, but lockdown has impacted the perceived 'necessity' of school attendance. 28% said that it is not essential for children to attend school every day.
- Most parents feel they have the foundations of a good relationship with school, but a large minority (38%), particularly in secondary schools, do not.
- Some parents feel that they need more support from schools. 18% of parents surveyed do not feel their child's needs are being met, with 18% also wanting more attendance support.

Recommendations

1. Create a National Parental Participation Strategy which includes best practice guidance to help schools and parents to engage more meaningfully with each other. Family Hubs should be integrated with existing school services and co-located within schools.
2. Roll out attendance mentors nationwide in the immediate term.
3. Make Department for Education guidance on attendance statutory. The government should fast track their commitment to roll out designated mental health leads for all schools.
4. Improve school attendance data metrics.
5. Recognise the value of relational work through youth clubs and services.
6. Introduce a Right to Sport in our schools.
7. Conduct a review into the effectiveness of fines and attendance prosecution. The fines for School Attendance Orders (SAOs) and attendance prosecution should be made the same value.

13. https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CSJ-Persistent_and_Severe_Absence.pdf

ImpactEd

Understanding Attendance: Findings on the drivers of pupil absence – January 2024[14]

Evidence base: Survey of 30,000+ young people and attendance data from 200,000+ pupils.

Key findings

- Sense of school belonging is a key driver of attendance across all contexts. This may be particularly important for females and is closely linked with feeling safe at school.
- There is an emerging challenge of a 'second transition' from year 7 to year 8 that deserves greater attention.
- Attendance drivers are intersectional. School leaders should avoid considering demographic factors in isolation. Female pupils who are eligible for pupil premium and have a special educational need are particularly likely to be low attending.
- Awareness of sanctions and consequences isn't strongly linked to improved attendance. Understanding of the importance of school and relationships with peers and teachers were more strongly associated with attendance.

Recommendations

1. Pupil voice and pupil leadership – pupil voice can lead to an increased likelihood that students will experience self-worth, engagement, and purpose in school.
2. Developing positive whole-school culture around attendance – a positive approach to family and child communication that avoids reinforcing negative perceptions of attendance is crucial.
3. Making the most of wraparound opportunities – these opportunities can be crucial for helping pupils to build social connections that will support school attendance.

Note: ImpactEd's Understanding Attendance project is continuing to actively expand the project to help more schools and build the collective evidence base. If your school or Trust is interested in participating to understand the drivers of pupil absence in your settings, you can find out more here.

14. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JwmKhhmT874b7RuHlB6zXF9s8ukwtwji/view?pli=1

Selected academic research papers on attendance since 2019

The following academic papers, all published since 2019, have been selected for their availability as full texts (links are provided in the footnotes) and because each offers potential interventions that may of be interest to schools. It should be noted that these papers should be considered in the context of the EEF's rapid review, which points to issues around evidence quality.

Moodley, R. et al. (2020) ***'Using Data Mining in Educational Administration: A Case Study on Improving School Attendance'.*** Applied Sciences, Vol 10(9), p.3116.[15]

Abstract: Pupil absenteeism remains a significant problem for schools across the globe with its negative impacts on overall pupil performance being well-documented. Whilst all schools continue to emphasize good attendance, some schools still find it difficult to reach the required average attendance, which in the UK is 96%. A novel approach is proposed to help schools improve attendance that leverages the market target model, which is built on association rule mining and probability theory, to target sessions that are most impactful to overall poor attendance. Tests conducted at Willen Primary School, in Milton Keynes, UK, show that significant improvements can be made to overall attendance, attendance in the target session, and persistent (chronic) absenteeism, through the use of this approach. The paper concludes by discussing school leadership, research implications, and highlights future work which includes the development of a software program that can be rolled-out to other schools.

Finning, K. et al. (2020) '***Secondary school practitioners' beliefs about risk factors for school attendance problems: a qualitative study'***. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, Vol 25(1), pp.15-28.[16]

Abstract: School staff have an important role to play in identifying and assisting pupils who require additional support to regularly attend school, but their beliefs about risk factors might influence their decisions regarding intervention. This qualitative study investigated educational practitioners' beliefs about risk factors for attendance problems. Sixteen practitioners from three secondary schools were interviewed via focus groups. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Practitioners identified risk factors related to the individual, their family, peers and school. Poor mental health was identified as a risk factor, but practitioners primarily focused on anxiety rather than other mental health problems like depression or behavioural disorders. The overall perception was that school factors were less important than individual, family and peer factors. Implications include a need for increased awareness of the role of school factors in attendance problems, focus on promoting positive peer and pupil-teacher relationships, and collaborative working between young people, families and schools.

15. https://digibug.ugr.es/bitstream/handle/10481/62609/applsci-10-03116-v2.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
16. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13632752.2019.1647684

Landell, M. G. (ed.) (2021) ***School Attendance Problems: A Research Update and Where to Go***. Jerringfonden.[17]

Contents

- Early detection and risk factors – Essays on...
  - The power of school attendance data; Building early detection systems to prevent chronic absenteeism; Early identification of attendance problems; School-related risk factors.
- Assessment – Essays on...
  - Functional risk-profiles of moderate school attendance problems; School-refusal assessment: The school refusal evaluation scale.
- Youth, Teachers, Parents – Essays on...
  - Exploring the voices of young people in school absenteeism; Teacher role in absenteeism; Parents and school attendance.
- Psychiatric and psychological interventions – Essays on...
  - School attendance problems from the perspective of child and adolescent psychiatry; Psychological interventions for school refusal and truancy; Where to go from here?

Cunningham. A. et al. (2022) ***'School staffs' experiences of supporting children with school attendance difficulties in primary schools: a qualitative study'***. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties. Vol 27:1. pp.72-87.[18]

Abstract: Children's absence from primary school is associated with lower attainment and social difficulties, and persistent absence at this age often continues or worsens as children progress into secondary education. It is therefore important to intervene early to interrupt this negative trajectory. This study used individual semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of eight members of primary school staff, who had experience supporting children with difficulty regularly attending school, from both mainstream and special primary schools in England. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Participants perceive school non-attendance to be a complex and challenging issue that can have a significant negative impact and can be caused and maintained by multiple factors related to the child, family and school/education. Participants believe prevention is key and identify several different social/emotional and learning-focused interventions they have used to support children to attend school regularly, with varying degrees of success. Participants emphasise that success of any intervention relies strongly on collaboration between parents, school staff and other agencies involved. Findings from this study suggest that sufficient resource, early intervention, development of a school community, collaboration with families, liaison with other professionals and targeted evidence-based strategies are all important in improving attendance in this age range.

17. https://jerringfonden.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/202101-Jerringfonden-Antologi-A5-sammanslagen.pdf
18. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13632752.2022.2067704

Eklund, K., et al (2022) '***Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Schools: A Meta-Analysis of Evidence-Based Interventions***'. School Psychology Review, Vol. 51(1), pp.95-111.[19]

Abstract: Research has demonstrated that regular school attendance is necessary for acceptable academic performance and the development of desirable social skills and behaviors. One in seven students in the United States struggles with chronic absenteeism, and 36 states use accountability metrics that are designed to assess attendance rates as part of school performance profiles. The current meta-analysis examined the effects of interventions and programs on student attendance outcomes in pre-K–12 public schools. Data were taken from 22 random and nonrandom controlled intervention studies published from 2000 to 2018. Between-group (weighted g=0.25; 95% confidence interval [CI], 0.14–0.36) and within-group (weighted g=1.04; 95% CI, 0.32–1.76) research designs resulted in small effects on attendance outcomes. Interventions were coded across three categories: behavioral interventions, family–school partnerships, and academic interventions. All three intervention areas resulted in small effects (weighted g=0.09–0.26). The confidence interval for family–school partnerships was the only one that included 0, which suggests the possibility of a zero effect for that variable. Results suggest that most practices implemented to improve student attendance are either understudied, lead to small effects, or both. Implications for practice and future research regarding attendance interventions are discussed.

Kearney, C.A. et al (2022) ***'School attendance and school absenteeism: A primer for the past, present, and theory of change for the future'***. Sec. Educational Psychology (Vol. 7).[20]

Abstract: School attendance and school absenteeism have been studied for over a century, leading to a rich and vast literature base. At the same time, powerful demographic, climate, social justice/equity, and technological/globalization forces are compelling disparate stakeholders worldwide to quickly adapt to rapidly changing conditions and to consider new visions of child education for the next century. These overarching forces are utilized within a theory of change approach to help develop such a vision of school attendance/absenteeism for this era. This approach adopts key long-range outcomes (readiness for adulthood; synthesized systemic, analytic approaches to school attendance/absence) derived from thematic outputs (reframing, social justice, shared alliances) that are themselves derived from contemporary inputs (movement of educational agencies toward readiness for adulthood, technological advances, schools, and communities as one). As with theory of change approaches, the purpose of this discourse is not to provide a roadmap but a compass to develop multi-stakeholder partnerships that can leverage shared resources and expertise to achieve a final mutual goal.

19. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sarah-De-Marchena/publication/345485326_Addressing_Chronic_Absenteeism_in_Schools_A_Meta-Analysis_of_Evidence-Based_Interventions/links/5fedfc43a6fdccdcb81e7ef0/Addressing-Chronic-Absenteeism-in-Schools-A-Meta-Analysis-of-Evidence-Based-Interventions.pdf
20. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2022.1044608/full?trk=public_post_main-feed-card_feed-article-content

Klein, M. & Sosu, E. M. (2023) ***'School Attendance and Academic Achievement: Understanding Variation across Family Socioeconomic Status'***. American Sociological Association. pp.1-18.[21]

Abstract: Studies consistently show the detrimental effect of school absences on pupils' achievement. However, due to an accumulation of multiple risks, school absenteeism may be more harmful to achievement among pupils from lower socioeconomic status (SES). Using a sample of upper-secondary students from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (n = 3,135), we investigated whether the association between absences (overall, sickness, and truancy) and achievement in high-stakes exams varied by family SES dimensions (parental education, class, free school meal registration, and housing). The findings for overall absences and truancy show no statistically significant differences across SES groups. However, sickness absences were more harmful to the achievement of lower SES students than higher SES students. Differences between the most and least disadvantaged groups were found on all SES dimensions except for parental education.

McDonald, B. et al (2023) ***'School attendance problems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – A multiple stakeholder qualitative study with parents and professionals'***. British Journal of Educational Psychology, Vol. 93(1), pp.386-401.[22]

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closures worldwide and unexcused absences have increased since schools reopened. Drawing on multiple stakeholders' perspectives, we aimed to (i) develop a detailed understanding of how school attendance problems (SAPs) have manifested for primary school-aged children in the context of COVID-19; and (ii) identify promising community-based intervention strategies. Attendance was particularly challenging for children with special educational needs and pre-existing anxiety problems. Compounding factors included COVID-related anxiety, difficulties adapting to new school routines, poor home-school communication and collaboration, and concerns about academic catch-up. Effective support was characterized by schools and families working closely together. Recommendations for practice improvements centred on early intervention, re-building parent-school relationships, peer support for parents, and improving special educational provision. New interventions for SAPs must be sensitive to the ongoing COVID-19 context. Help should be easily accessible in the community and address modifiable risk and protective factors for individual children, in family systems, and at the home-school interface.

21. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/00380407231191541
22. https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/bjep.12562

SSAT's 'best bets' for school attendance leads

What schools can learn from recent research findings on attendance and punctuality

1. **Reframe school culture around the surplus of good attendance and punctuality rather than the deficit of problematic absence and lateness.**
   a. Emphasise belonging, relational activity, connectedness of school life, and wider outcomes than exam success, in all discussions about attendance and punctuality.
   b. Utilise student voice and leadership to evaluate the value and effectiveness of curriculum and enhance wraparound provision for better personal development opportunities.
   c. Focus less on sanctions and consequences for missing school and more on benefits of attending. Greater focus on recognition of attendance and (even small) improvements.
2. **Prioritise accurate data collection, rapid data analyses, and thoughtful data evaluation processes to enable timely, focused, and nuanced responses.**
   a. Use data to identify at-risk students, with a particular focus on identifying those who have multiple intersecting characteristics that are correlated with risk factors.
   b. Place value on data that helps pre-empt attendance issues, or helps leaders see need for early intervention, as well as data on those needing targeted and responsive support.
   c. Ensure analysis of historic school, as well as student and group, patterns and trends such as start of term and year attendance, problematic sessions, year group transitions.
3. **Recognise how family/parent attitudes to school have changed since the pandemic and seek to engage them with empathy for their position.**
   a. Discuss with parents and pupils the context-specific barriers to attendance and punctuality, including how your school finds families "easy to ignore" (rather than "hard to reach").
   b. Provide explicit guidance for staff interacting with families about attendance, ensuring high quality professional learning for all, especially those with most frequent contact.
   c. Ensure communication with families is rooted in the school culture emphasising good attendance and punctuality, informed by accurate and timely data analysis and evaluation.
4. **Provide support for those with the most pressing attendance and punctuality needs that is individualised, timely, nuanced, and tenacious.**
   a. Ensure high levels of consistency in staff engagement with persistent and severe absence cases, through coherence of philosophy, training, data usage, and communication style.
   b. Know your school's and families' key drivers of absence and lateness to prioritise efficient resourcing of enhanced work with children for improved attendance and punctuality.
   c. Be persistent in brokering multiagency collaboration and signposting for at risk pupils, building provision through engaging your community's assets, including pupils.
5. **Ensure that all your school's work in helping pupils achieve high levels of attendance and punctuality is robustly evidence informed.**
   a. Pay heed to the existing evidence base of what might work when planning your strategy and tactics to improve the levels of attendance and punctuality at your school.
   b. Couple quantitative and qualitative data about the barriers to high levels of attendance and punctuality to inform your interventions and how you will measure their impact.
   c. Engage internal and/or external partners to help you identify what might work, to identify evaluative measures for planned provision, and to give an objective view of impact.

We are SSAT, the Schools, Students and Teachers network.

We exist to help improve outcomes for all young people. As a membership organisation of schools and academies across the UK and internationally, we work with leaders, teachers and pupils to drive school improvement and innovation, and celebrate their successes. We believe in a **truly school-led system**, with schools working in partnership across and beyond the education sector.

At SSAT's heart are our **membership networks**, bringing together school leaders, teachers and pupils. We have been working with schools for over 30 years, and continue to **offer insight and understanding** into teaching, learning and system leadership. Our **professional development** and **school improvement programmes** help leaders and teachers to further outcomes for all young people, and develop leadership at all levels across the system.

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