Headlines from the [Nuffield Foundation event on school absence, school closure and learning loss](#)

by Dr Emily Tanner

At the end of an academic year that has seen a [plethora of initiatives](#) from attendance hubs to daily attendance data, [rates of school absence](#) remain persistently high. The Nuffield Foundation convened researchers, policymakers, school leaders and the wider education sector to consider what can be done to improve attendance and learning in light of the latest evidence.

The timing of the event, two days ahead of the general election, focused attention on what an incoming government should prioritise, noting the absence of explicit detail on school attendance in the manifestos of the largest political parties. However, there was agreement that targeted attendance interventions alone won't solve the attendance crisis and that more thought is needed about how to address the broader issues of school inclusion, family context and home-school relationships.

The recording of the event, slides, speaker biographies and links to reports are available [here](#). The purpose of this note is to summarise the key messages from the event and to highlight areas for future research.

What is the scale of the problem?

The [Department for Education data](#), presented by Dr Markus Klein, shows that the overall absence rate and persistent absence are higher than at any point in the past 20 years. Following the rapid increase in absence precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic, absence rates have remained high, with the [latest data](#) showing an overall absence rate of approximately 7% and one in ten pupils persistently absent in 2023/24, missing one day of school per fortnight on average.

There are clear patterns in the absence data. Absence rates are higher in secondary than primary schools, and higher still in special schools. In secondary schools, pupils from [disadvantaged backgrounds](#) are nearly twice as likely to be persistently absent. Anna Feuchtwang, CEO of the National Children's [Bureau](#), noted that a high proportion of absent children have SEND and mental health challenges.

However, participants also noted the periods of improvement in school attendance in the early 2000s (during a period of national attendance interventions) and 2008-2015 (in the period of austerity) which suggest the problem is not intractable.

What explains the high rates of school absence?

While recognising the [many and varied reasons for school absence](#), the presentations and panel discussion focused heavily on the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic at individual pupil, school and system level.

Prof Steve Gibbons set the scene by examining the effect of 'tier regulations', the **government pandemic policy** which set different restrictions on local areas according to rates of Covid-19 infection. He showed that even when schools were officially open, living in an area with higher restrictions was associated with lower school attendance. Given that higher tier areas were more likely to be economically disadvantaged, the gap in attendance widened. Using statistical models, the authors estimate that absence rates will likely persist for a number of years. The unintended consequence of pandemic policy is that it sent 'signals' which affected the culture of school attendance.

The panelists described this post-pandemic effect from different perspectives. Ed Dorrell shared insights from the [focus groups with **parents**](#) carried out across the country by [Public First](#), a policy, research, opinion and strategy consultancy. The views they expressed suggested that the "social contract was destroyed" by Covid and the idea of mandatory daily school attendance has gone.

Anna Feuchtwang described attendance as a **symptom** of a deeper crisis in support systems for pupils with SEND and mental health challenges. NCB's research and wider work with families suggests that disabled children and those with SEND have lost the sense of belonging, and parents feel that the wider system has let them down.

Daniela Grasso, Executive Principal of two primaries in a large multi-academy trust, described how schools could **buck the trend**. Despite challenging circumstances, with 50% of pupils on free school meals and over 30 languages spoken in her school, attendance was not badly affected by the pandemic, which Daniela attributed to school pandemic practices of maintaining the consistency of the school day, providing devices, registering pupils twice a day and following up on absence, retaining small group work, and marking lesson work.

What are the consequences of absence?

Markus Klein and Prof Edward Sosu shared new analysis of longitudinal cohort data which finds that school absence has a negative impact on GCSE **attainment** and persistent effects on **labour market outcomes** up to mid adulthood. Missing five days of school at age 10 is associated with

an increased likelihood of having no qualifications at age 42 and being out of the labour market between the ages of 30 and 42. Absence in any year of school makes a difference to GCSE attainment, but is most harmful in Years 6 and 10, across the transition from primary to secondary, and into Key Stage 4. The researchers also explored absence trajectories and found that although outcomes were affected most where absence increased over time, consistently moderate absence was also detrimental.

The following two presentations focused on the more recent past, examining the impact of school closures and learning loss during the pandemic. In Steve Gibbons' research, **local tier restrictions** were found to reduce achievement at the end of primary school, explained partly, but not entirely by the higher absence rates.

The analysis presented by Prof Lee Elliot Major used a new skill formation model to estimate the **long-term impact of pandemic-related learning loss**. As a result of missed opportunities for developing social-emotional skills as well as academic learning, the authors estimate that by 2030, only 4 in 10 pupils will achieve Grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs (down from 45.3% in 2022/23). They also estimate a decline in income mobility, meaning that a child's future income will be more strongly determined by the income of their parents.

A common theme across the research and panel discussion was the importance of **social-emotional skills** (or 'psychosocial factors') in explaining the link between school absence and attainment, and therefore in shaping effective solutions. Edward Sosu showed how externalising and risky behaviours and education motivation at age 14 helped explain the impact of absence on attainment. Lee Elliot Major's report identified that strong social-emotional skills during early secondary school were important for later attainment, with the patterns different for boys and girls.

The notion of a compounding effect of absence and the value of school for wider skill development resonated for the panelists, drawing on their own experience. Ed Dorrell suggested we need a different way of talking about school, with greater reference to the role of community and wider aspects of learning.

What can be done to improve attendance and education outcomes?

The expert panel, chaired by Josh Hillman, explored strategies for policymakers and school leaders to address the attendance crisis. The breadth of the discussion reflected what Anna Feuchtwang described as a need for a "whole system rethink" - addressing the systemic causes of school absence rather than focusing on isolated attendance interventions.

There was agreement that more **resource** for schools needs to be part of the answer. The panelists noted that systemic failures in wider support services such as CAMHS (mental health),

and SEND, compounded with declining school budgets put huge pressure on schools. Daniela Grasso emphasised that "it's really hard to be a teacher" and that needing to respond to families' challenges affected the teacher workforce. The need to fund and resource early intervention was also evident in the longitudinal data presented by Markus Klein and to reduce the number of children missing from education (identified in NCB research).

That said, the discussion focused on **low-cost policy solutions** for attendance and learning loss in recognition of constrained public finances for the new government. Lee Elliot Major set out six approaches, many of which were picked up in the later discussion. These include a national programme of trained undergraduate tutors to provide academic and mentoring support, developing evidence-informed approaches to building partnerships between schools, parents and communities, and establishing an enrichment guarantee to nurture social-emotional skills.

Belonging was a theme that underpinned much of the discussion that followed. Anna Feuchtwang talked about NCB's Belonging Matters programme which is piloting a practical whole-school approach to ensuring that pupils feel valued, respected and supported through relationships, participation, social networks, and fairness.

Inclusion and wellbeing were identified as important aspects of belonging. Daniela described how her school emphasises the importance of enjoyment, and values sports and extra-curricular activities. Harriet Gill from Coram, in the audience, made the point that the sense of belonging in school is particularly important for children in care.

Rebuilding the three-way **contract between schools, parents and pupils** was also a recurring theme. Ed Dorrell talked about the need to create a new narrative about school as the 'civic anchor' in a community, with relationships and socialisation at the heart. Daniela Grasso described her school's approach of trying to understand the home context, engage parents through inclusive communication, and set high expectations in a way that is respectful and understanding.

Various ways were identified in which **data** could be used better to address the attendance crisis. The evidence from Markus Klein's analysis highlighted the need for schools to collect frequent data on attendance (a point being addressed through daily attendance data pilots), and understand and target those at greatest risk. This would involve better data sharing across the transition from primary to secondary school. There was also a suggestion that data systems could be built for schools to create bespoke insights to support early intervention.

Recognising that **accountability** measures drive school behaviour, participants identified some options for using the system to improve attendance. One of Lee Elliot Major's low cost policy recommendations is for Ofsted to explicitly consider disadvantage in schools and credit the schools that excel in serving under-resourced communities. Ben Styles, from NFER in the

audience, suggested developing alternative metrics that encompass wider aspects of school culture to promote a school culture that fosters attendance, a point that resonated with other speakers. While acknowledging that Labour's proposed balanced score card for Ofsted could encompass greater breadth, Ed Dorrell cautioned that additional accountability measures could create perverse incentives and that any change should be introduced carefully.

Daniela Grasso spoke of her experience of leading one of the DfE's Attendance Hubs, one of the government's **targeted attendance interventions** set out in [its response](#) to the Education Selection Committee inquiry on persistent absence. Daniela commented on the value of sharing good practice and creating a space to talk about challenges and solutions, but asked whether there might be a more efficient way to achieve this, noting the time investment required for coordinating 25 schools across the country in this way.

How can research contribute?

The event identified potential areas for further research to support policy and practice aimed at improving attendance:

- Causes and consequences of absence rates
- Strategies for policymakers and school leaders to improve school attendance, building on the [existing evidence](#)
- Understanding the relationship between school attendance and increasing identification/incidence of SEND and mental health issues
- Short- and longer-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Implications of school absence for post-16 transitions and engagement in learning
- Geographic variations, learning from UK and international experience
- The role and perspectives of parents/carers
- Factors outside of the education system such as economic hardship and family context
- Use of data to support school decision-making and accountability
- Young people's voice in relation to school culture, enjoyment of school and attendance

The Nuffield Foundation invites applications to address these topics. To find out more about how to apply visit our [Research, Development & Analysis Fund](#). The next application deadline is 14 October 2024.