

Attendance in secondary schools

Ofsted undertook a survey of attendance in 31 secondary schools in the summer and autumn terms 2006. The survey identified critical factors in preventing and reducing attendance problems in secondary schools and also assessed the impact of the National Strategy in promoting attendance. Twenty-four of the schools had been working with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to reduce their rates of student absence. The other schools were selected because of good practice identified in previous inspections. In addition, data from inspection reports in secondary schools in 2005/06 were analysed.

- The better the quality of education, the better the students' attendance. Good leadership and management, high quality teaching and a flexible curriculum have a significant impact on attendance.
- Attendance rates have improved nationally since 2002/03. However, unauthorised absence has not shown the same level of improvement and practice in schools is inconsistent. One school may accept a reason for absence that another may not be prepared to condone. Although there was a rise in authorised absence in 2005/06, high levels of illness explain this to some extent.
- There is a strong relationship between social deprivation and lower rates of attendance.
- Many of the schools surveyed did not do enough to ensure that students catch up with work that they miss. Schools' systems were inconsistent. Individual teachers were left to organise provision rather than being supported by clear policies and expectations.
- The DfES attendance strategy has had a positive impact in the 351 schools which were targeted during the 2005/06 school year because they had high rates of absence. In comparison with the previous year there were 27% fewer persistent truants in the target schools and there was a drop in the rate of unauthorised and overall absence. Audits prompted

by the National Strategy's regional advisers for attendance and behaviour, and the subsequent action plans, have helped to focus resources more purposefully. The education welfare services in the local authorities have been effective in challenging senior leaders, and schools' partnerships with other agencies are improving.

- Legal sanctions and telephoning students' homes on the first day of absence have been effective deterrents in the schools surveyed, but they have not reached the most disaffected groups. These strategies alone cannot resolve all attendance problems.
- Many students whose attendance was marginally over 90% regarded this situation as entirely acceptable. Since many schools mainly focus their attention on students whose attendance is below this threshold, they may be inadvertently condoning absence rates of close to 10%.



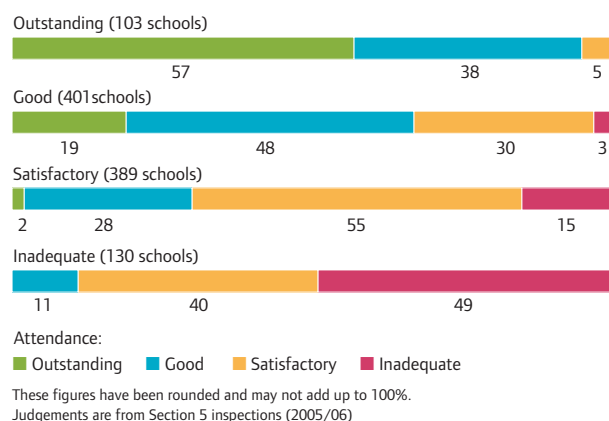
The national picture

An analysis of judgements made by inspectors in 2005/06 suggests that there is a link between schools' overall effectiveness and student attendance. Socio-economic factors are also significant.

Overall effectiveness

Inspection findings in 2005/06 showed a strong relationship between schools' overall effectiveness and students' attendance. Attendance was nearly always good or outstanding in the best schools.

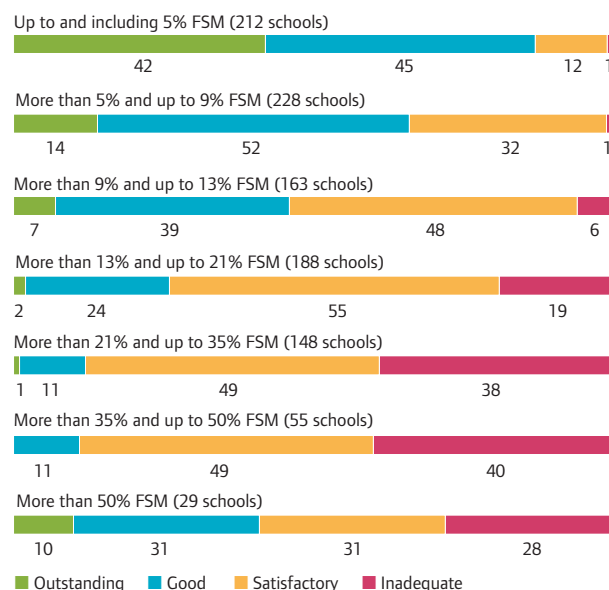
Figure 1: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with overall effectiveness judgements. (percentage of schools)



Free school meal provision

Schools with the lowest free school meal (FSM) rates had the highest levels of attendance. An interesting change occurs in the highest FSM band, where the percentage of schools with good and outstanding attendance increases.

Figure 2: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with free school meal rates. (percentage of schools)

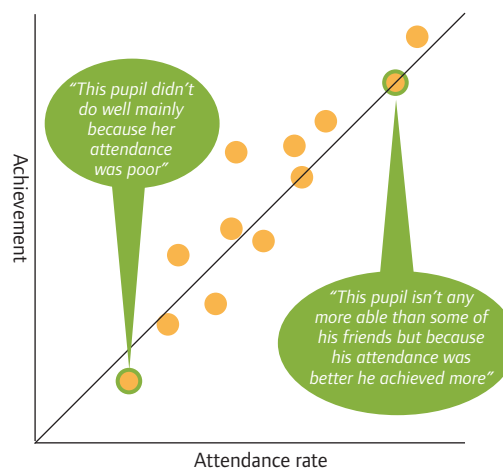


Although this only applies to a very small number of schools, it suggests that a high level of eligibility for free school meals may not be an acceptable reason for low levels of attendance.

The connection between attendance and achievement

The DfES gave targeted schools general information about the effect of poor attendance on students' achievements. Schools found this helpful and used it to make their attendance data relevant and useful for students. One school used data from the previous Year 11 to create a graph similar to the one below. Staff showed the graph to all students in Key Stage 4 to demonstrate that the students who did best were those with the highest attendance rates. The students understood that this was real information about students they knew and this helped them see its importance.

Figure 3: A chart similar to one used by a school to illustrate the link between attendance and achievement.



Listening to students

All students interviewed in the survey commented on the importance of lessons being well managed and fun. One student said that his attendance had improved since coming into Year 10 because 'we have lots of different activities and our options are more interesting.'

Three separate groups of students were interviewed, including those who missed a few sessions regularly and those with very low attendance levels. The main reasons that all these students gave for their unauthorised absences were consistent. They emphasised:

- that some lessons were boring
- difficulties getting on with particular teachers
- difficulties catching up with work.

A few students said they had experienced bullying which the school had not resolved effectively.

One school recognised that weak arrangements for catching up with work were a barrier to improving attendance. The school introduced formal arrangements for students who had missed work by enabling tutors and subject teachers to work together and prioritise a short 'to do' list. The student and the tutor then discussed how and when the work would be completed.

All schools in the survey gathered students' views about the work of the school. However, in a few of the survey schools which were targeted by the DfES, students whose attendance was poor said that they were not asked systematically about why they did not attend. These students may have been absent on the days the school asked for their views. The schools seldom found ways to seek and act upon the views of those students who were hardest to reach.

Strategies to promote attendance

Teaching

Inspection findings from 2005/06 showed a strong correlation between the quality of teaching and learning and inspection judgements about attendance. Students interviewed as part of the survey, regardless of their rate of attendance, were consistent in saying that boring lessons influenced their level of attendance and that more active, interesting and fun lessons would encourage their attendance.

Curriculum flexibility

The great majority of schools surveyed were using curriculum flexibility more effectively to motivate and re-engage students. In the best practice, schools reviewed curriculum pathways regularly to ensure that they met the students' needs. They created bespoke packages, often using modular and activity based courses, for those who were hardest to reach. They negotiated to gain commitment from students.

Mentoring

Students with particular difficulties were sometimes allocated to named staff for mentoring purposes. Where this happened these key workers were crucial to improving attendance. However, they were not necessarily learning mentors or school counsellors. The most important factor was that they showed genuine concern and care. In students' eyes, they were significant people who could make things happen and their desire to help was tangible.

Multi-agency working

An increasingly wide range of services and agencies was helping schools to deal with attendance. Some services and agencies were used in preventive work, and others were called upon to respond to individual cases or to help groups of students. The most effective practice was when schools drew on external support as they stepped up their response to a student's poor attendance. These responses were introduced most successfully when multi-agency meetings triggered intervention.

Transition from primary to secondary school

Preventive strategies at transfer from primary to secondary education were effective in many schools. A few schools had recruited staff with primary phase experience in order to help match practice to the needs of Year 7 students. One school introduced a primary school structure at Year 7, with the pupils staying with the same teacher for a number of subjects during the week. The school was able to show improved attendance and better progress compared with previous cohorts. Another school used a project-based curriculum in Year 7 with an emphasis on the development of key skills such as communication so that the pupils could build new friendships.

Telephoning home on the first day of absence

'First day calling' has been beneficial in the schools surveyed, although this strategy was less successful for students with the most challenging attendance problems, particularly where parents condoned the students' absence.

Leadership and management

Strong and determined leadership is crucial to secure good attendance. In schools where this was evident:

- the importance of attendance was made clear to students, parents and staff
- education welfare officers were an integrated part of the school's attendance team, operating flexibly and responsively to influence change and improvements
- roles were made clear but responsibilities for attendance were shared by staff and not just given to education welfare officers and attendance officers
- monitoring was carried out regularly, helped by electronic methods of gathering and analysing data.

The systematic stepping up of responses was a consistent feature in schools which were resolving attendance problems successfully.

Schools commented that although they used legal sanctions in only a few cases they felt this action was a deterrent for other parents.

Case studies

Two factors were particularly important in ensuring that schools were in a good position to improve attendance levels: effective data collection and analysis, and strengthening the role of the education welfare officer.

Gathering and analysing data

In one school, an online system for recording individual students' attendance at registration and in each lesson enabled attendance patterns to be linked to students' progress. The school gave regular feedback to staff, students and parents. The headteacher said this approach 'leaves no hiding place for the less committed or poorer attendees'. The feedback also provided students with evidence that there was a strong link between attendance and examination results.

Influence of the education welfare officer

In this school the headteacher deliberately identified the role of the education welfare officer in the management structure of the school, with a direct line to the senior leadership team. The headteacher wanted the education welfare officer to have a high level of influence and to challenge school improvement. The education welfare officer believed her role became more effective because she was:

- viewed as an integral part of the management team and staff
- given the opportunity to challenge existing practice
- able to access all relevant information technology systems to analyse patterns and trends of absence and to prepare regular, detailed reports of caseload, interventions and subsequent attendance changes for each pupil.

References and useful links

Department for Children, Families and Schools school attendance website: www.dcf.gov.uk/schoolattendance

Case studies on Teachernet: www.teachernet.gov.uk/casestudies

The Key Stage 4 curriculum: increased flexibility and work-related learning, Ofsted, 2007. www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070013

QCA website (use 'attendance' in search box): www.qca.org.uk

A briefing paper on attendance in secondary schools is available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070014

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