

## Written evidence submitted by Action Tutoring

### Context of the evidence

Dr Edward Sosu and Dr Markus Klein from the University of Strathclyde provide the evidence presented in response to this call. We are both Readers in the School of Education and research the determinants and consequences of absences from school. Our evidence is based on a series of studies we led and ongoing research on school absenteeism, socioeconomic inequalities, influences on achievement and post-school outcomes<sup>1</sup>. The ESRC<sup>2</sup> and Nuffield Foundation<sup>3</sup> fund these studies.

### Factors causing persistent absenteeism among socioeconomically disadvantaged students

Socioeconomic disadvantage is a primary cause of persistent school absenteeism and intersects with other disadvantages. Although empirical evidence for why this is the case is rare, we can infer the mechanisms based on several existing theories and empirical research. Our *first piece of evidence* is from a systematic review<sup>4</sup> that synthesises global research on the relationship between socioeconomic background (SES) and school absences. Our objective was to examine the multidimensional nature of family SES (such as income, education, occupational status) and absenteeism (e.g., truancy, sickness, suspension).

#### Key findings:

- Most reviewed studies found that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to be absent from school.
- These findings were largely confirmed among populations at risk of school absence, such as those with disabilities, medical conditions (e.g., asthma, sickle cell disease), students with special educational needs and minority ethnic groups. In other words, those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to miss school among at-risk groups. This indicates that an accumulation of multiple disadvantages marks the educational trajectory of the most vulnerable children. Therefore, socioeconomic risks may intersect with other disadvantages to impact school absenteeism. Policy and practice interventions designed to reduce school absenteeism should account for these possible interaction effects.
- There was stronger evidence of a relationship between SES and absenteeism at the family level than at the school level. Our review suggests that family-level processes resulting from low socioeconomic status have more detrimental effects on absenteeism than school-level processes.
- Studies using SES measures of financial resources (e.g., free school meal registration) provided more evidence for this association than studies measuring sociocultural resources (e.g., parental education). This suggests that sociocultural resources and financial endowments are both significant, but the latter is more crucial. To reduce social disparities in school absenteeism, interventions must address the economic circumstances of families.
- We found limited evidence that socioeconomic gaps in absenteeism vary by the reasons for absence.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://schoolattendance.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FR004943%2F1>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/understanding-school-attendance-education-and-labour-market-outcomes>

<sup>4</sup> Sosu, E. M., Dare, S., Goodfellow, C., & Klein, M. (2021). Socioeconomic status and school absenteeism: a systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Review of Education*, 9(3), e3291.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3291>

- Only one of the studies in our review examined why children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to miss school. The study found mediating pathways of externalising and internalising behaviour between parental education and school absenteeism in the Norwegian context.
- Drawing on theories reviewed in our systematic review, socioeconomic status may influence absenteeism via developmental, health, neighbourhood, family discord, parenting, and school alienation mechanisms.

Our **second piece of evidence** consists of empirical research using linked school administrative and Census data in Scotland to examine socioeconomic inequalities in school attendance<sup>5</sup>. Our research aimed to determine how different socioeconomic background dimensions (i.e., social class, parental education, free school meal registration, housing status, and neighbourhood deprivation [SIMD]) may influence school absenteeism differently. In addition, we sought to determine the relationship between these distinct socioeconomic factors and distinct forms of absenteeism (truancy, sickness-related absence, family holidays and temporary exclusion).

Key findings:

- Absenteeism from school is socially stratified. All dimensions of socioeconomic background (i.e., social class, parental education, free school meal registration, housing status, and neighbourhood deprivation [SIMD]) uniquely increased the risk of being absent from school.
- Pupils from socially rented households and households with no qualifications are the most likely to be absent from school. These factors are consistently associated with all forms of absenteeism (overall, sickness-related, truancy, temporary exclusion) except for family holidays. Several socioeconomic dimensions contribute to school absenteeism, but parental education and living in socially rented housing are the most consistent.
- Evidence from sociological theories on the role of parental education suggests the significance of parental cultural capital, while evidence from social housing suggests pathways via health, neighbourhood, or financial stressors. The association between socioeconomic background and absenteeism did not vary across gender or place of residence (urban vs rural).

Research examining socioeconomic disparities in school absenteeism after the first wave of COVID-19 school closures in Scotland constitutes the **final piece of evidence**<sup>6</sup>.

Key findings:

- Socioeconomic disparities in school absenteeism were greater after Covid-19-related school closures than in previous years. This suggests that the disproportionate health impact of Covid-19 on those from disadvantaged backgrounds and its unequal impact on children's learning and well-being during the school closures extend to inequalities in school attendance after the school closures.
- This rise was caused by widening disparities in school absenteeism due to Covid-19-related and non-Covid-19 reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> Klein, M., Sosu, E. M., & Dare, S. (2020). Mapping inequalities in school attendance: the relationship between dimensions of socioeconomic status and forms of school absence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 118, 105432. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105432>

<sup>6</sup> Sosu, E., & Klein, M. (2021). Socioeconomic Disparities in School Absenteeism after the First Wave of COVID-19 School Closures in Scotland. University of Strathclyde. <https://pureportal.strath.ac.uk/en/publications/socioeconomic-disparities-in-school-absenteeism-after-the-first-w>

- The rise in socioeconomic inequality in non-Covid-19 related absenteeism was caused by higher absence rates among students from the most disadvantaged areas and lower absence rates among students from the least disadvantaged areas.
- While the causes of increased absences for non-covid reasons among low-SES pupils have not been empirically tested, several hypotheses can be advanced. First, this was a time of continued restrictions, and it is possible that learners from these backgrounds lived with vulnerable family members, and the drop in attendance was a way to protect loved ones. Second, absences may have been caused by the difficulties that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds faced while home-schooling, making re-engagement with education difficult after schools reopened.

### **Ways to better support schools and families to improve attendance**

- Our studies indicate that lower socioeconomic status is a key risk antecedent for various forms of absenteeism. Therefore, improving the socioeconomic conditions of families and combating child poverty should be a central component of interventions to increase school attendance and reduce socioeconomic absenteeism gaps.
- Our systematic review reveals that family SES significantly predicts school absenteeism among disadvantaged groups, such as those with disabilities. This suggests that policies and interventions must take an intersectional approach that addresses multiple disadvantages. Interventions to reduce absenteeism should be tailored to subgroups, targeting combinations of socioeconomic and demographic risk factors and conceptualising a multicomponent intervention framework that combines individualised and whole-school interventions.
- Given our findings that different dimensions of disadvantage (e.g., free school meal registration, parental education, parental class) have distinct effects on school attendance, a more nuanced approach should be taken towards the socioeconomic background. Therefore, it would be prudent to reconsider policy decisions that are primarily driven by a single indicator of socioeconomic disadvantage. Efforts to combat absenteeism should contemplate disaggregating data using broader socioeconomic indicators.
- Addressing the pandemic's disproportionate short- and long-term effects on the most vulnerable children must be at the top of the policy agenda for education. There is a need for long-term policies that mitigate the detrimental impact of Covid-19 on socioeconomic disparities in school attendance.
- An evidence-based approach to attendance interventions in schools is critical to ensure the success and effectiveness of these programs. By relying on data and research, educators can make informed decisions on which strategies are most likely to improve attendance while avoiding ineffective or potentially harmful interventions. Evidence-based practices help to maximise the use of limited resources and ensure that students receive the support they need to succeed in school.
- Monitoring attendance in schools and conducting a thorough analysis of the collected data is crucial for informing policy and practice. It helps to identify patterns and trends in student absence, allowing educators to address the root causes of absenteeism and develop targeted interventions. The data collected from attendance monitoring can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and programs, guiding continuous improvement efforts. By regularly monitoring and analysing attendance data, schools can ensure that their policies and practices are evidence-based and aligned with the goal of improving student attendance and success.

## The impact of the Department's proposed reforms to improve attendance

The department's reforms highlight some crucial success factors for improving attendance. Overall, these reforms are consistent with research evidence reviews<sup>7</sup> suggesting that supportive approaches are superior to punitive ones for increasing school attendance.

In addition, we have the following suggestions:

- One of the leading causes of school absences is growing up in disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances, which the reforms must explicitly address. So far, our research indicates that low SES affects not only unauthorised absences, but also authorised absences, such as those due to sickness<sup>8</sup>. In addition, we found that both unauthorised and authorised absences were detrimental to academic achievement<sup>9</sup> and post-school destinations<sup>10</sup>. Considering the impact of adverse socioeconomic circumstances on child health, addressing family economic hardship will be a crucial means of enhancing school attendance.
- Although addressing school-related factors is crucial for improving attendance, addressing the challenges children face outside of school is equally important. We, therefore, advocate for support mechanisms that involve families and communities.
- The proposed reforms are heavily focused on combating unauthorised absences. According to our research, authorised absences, such as those due to sickness, have an equally negative impact on school achievement and post-school destinations. Therefore, the proposed reforms should be expanded to include policies and interventions tackling all causes of school absence.
- In addition to improving school attendance, we argue that the reforms should focus on mitigating the negative consequences of absences on pupils' learning, achievement, and post-school outcomes. This is because some children will miss school through no fault of their own (e.g., sickness or exceptional domestic circumstances). These absences are more difficult to avoid but have equally harmful effects on pupils' outcomes. Therefore, the reforms should also emphasise what can be done to support learners during their absence or to help them recover any learning lost during this time.

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<sup>7</sup> Education Endowment Foundation. (2022). Attendance Interventions: Rapid Evidence Assessment. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/attendance-interventions-rapid-evidence-assessment>

<sup>8</sup> Klein, M., Sosu, E. M., & Dare, S. (2020). Mapping inequalities in school attendance: the relationship between dimensions of socioeconomic status and forms of school absence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 118, 105432. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105432>

<sup>9</sup> Klein, M., Sosu, E. M., & Dare, S. (2022). School absenteeism and academic achievement: does the reason for absence matter? *AERA Open*, 8(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211071115>

<sup>10</sup> Dräger, J., Klein, M., & Sosu, E. (2023, February 7). The long-term consequences of early school absences for educational attainment and labour market outcomes. <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/7z2bx>