Helping pupils return to school:
strategies for supporting better attendance

Insights from pupils and staff in nine secondary schools with strong or improving attendance

We recognise that some of these approaches could increase workload and take additional resources.

NFER Classroom

1 Supportive relationships matter

A supportive school environment is essential for encouraging attendance. Pupils are more likely to return when they feel safe, valued and understood.

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

Things to consider:
- Prioritise supportive, individualised approaches to addressing pupil absence.
- Create a welcoming environment and build positive relationships with pupils and their parents/carers to encourage attendance and support returns after absence.

2 Take early, pro-active steps

Spotting emerging patterns of absence and responding quickly helped schools prevent issues from escalating. Staff told us that acts - like a home visit or call - made families feel supported and seen.

> "The school carries out home visits every day... [These actions tell] the parents, 'we care about you'." – Headteacher

Things to consider:
- Monitor attendance data regularly.
- Reach out as soon as concerns arise, even informally.
- Offer practical support and signpost solutions where possible.

3 Reintegration needs to be structured and sensitive

Pupils told us that the longer they were absent, the harder it became to return to school. Key challenges included anxiety about catching up, fear of questions, and changes in friendships.

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

Things to consider:
Consider implementing structured re-entry support for pupils. This could include:
- Designated staff checking in with returning pupils.
- Sensitivity around questioning pupils about their absence, ensuring discussions take place privately where needed.

4 Academic support reduces stress

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

> "We have Google Classroom so teachers will put on what we've missed during the lessons." – Pupil

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

5 Talk about mental health carefully

Schools told us that mental health concerns - particularly anxiety - were a significant barrier to attendance, and often harder to support. The language used around mental health was seen as particularly important.

> "With students with mental health difficulties, you actually have to have very tough conversations with families and say: we understand it's really difficult to get them into school." – Senior Leader

Things to consider:
- Train staff to increase their knowledge of mental health, and to recognise when professional mental health support is needed.
- Encourage nuanced conversation with parents and pupils about developing coping strategies and building resilience.

6 Belonging boosts attendance

Making attendance a shared responsibility between staff, pupils and families helps build a culture where coming to school is valued. Helping pupils feel they belong may also improve attendance and support learning.

> "I think ultimately, it's really about creating that sense of belonging. I think that's the magic key to unlocking attendance." – Senior Leader

Things to consider:
- Combine rewards with appropriate sanctions to reinforce attendance expectations.
- Consider adopting the DfE's whole-school wellbeing principles.

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