

# Supporting pupils in Years 7-to-11 to return to school following absence: information for schools

## What are the aims of the project?

Absence rates dramatically increased following the Covid-19 pandemic and have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, with secondary schools experiencing significantly higher absence rates than primary schools. Understanding how best to mitigate the harmful impacts of all types of absence is crucial to ensuring that pupils can achieve their potential. This project will provide qualitative evidence on strategies schools can use to support pupils' return to school after absence, with the aim of preventing short-term absences from escalating into long-term issues. Specifically, the project will explore:

- How pupils feel when they are absent from school and the extent to which these feelings vary based on the reasons for their absence and their school's attendance policy
- How schools currently help pupils return to school following absence, and how this differs between schools
- Whether there any additional forms of support that schools or pupils believe would help pupils feel more comfortable and prepared to return to school after an absence.

## Who is conducting the project?

[The National Foundation for Educational Research](#) (NFER) is conducting this research. NFER is the leading provider of independent educational evidence and assessments in the UK. As a registered charity, our mission is to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere and to support positive change across education systems.

## What will the project involve for schools?

We hope to speak to staff and pupils in up to 10 secondary maintained schools that have been purposefully selected to identify good or innovative practice examples of approaches to helping pupils return to school following absence. In each school we hope to speak to:

- a senior school or trust leader with responsibility for attendance (30 mins)
- the school's senior attendance champion/pastoral lead (30-45 mins)
- up to two groups of 4-6 pupils, drawn from years 7-11, who have recently experienced periods of absence from school (up to 45 mins for each group).

Interviews/focus groups will be conducted in person at each school and will be audio recorded with the interviewees' permission to ensure we have an accurate record of the conversation.

We aim to speak with pupils who are at risk of becoming persistently absent but have not yet reached that threshold. We would appreciate schools' guidance on selecting pupils and grouping for the focus groups, so that pupils feel comfortable participating in the groups

together. For example, pupils could be grouped by year group, or by a common reason for absence (e.g., anxiety, illness, or behaviour-related).

We ask that schools notify parents/carers of pupils selected for the focus groups and provide them with the information sheet about the study and ask them to return the consent form to a key contact at the school. To support this, we have information sheets for parents/carers and for pupils (please see email attachments, copies can also be found on our [webpage](#)). Participation in the study is voluntary, and schools/interviewees can withdraw from the study at any time.

Please be assured that NFER researchers are DBS approved and adhere to strict safeguarding protocols. We are committed to ensuring the safety and well-being of all pupils and staff throughout the research process.

The interviews will be undertaken between Monday 14th October 2024 and Friday 6th December 2024 at a time convenient for your school.

### **Why have you approached my school/trust to take part?**

Secondary schools/trusts have been purposefully selected – as far as possible - to identify good or innovative practice examples of approaches to helping pupils return to school following absence. Schools have been identified through web searching, analysis of DfE attendance data, and via recommendations. Our sampling has taken account of attendance data, school characteristics (e.g., proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, with SEND, MAT or LA maintained), and our knowledge of the approaches they are using to support attendance/returning to school following absence.

In summary, if you have been approached for an interview then it means we think you are doing innovative work on attendance, and we would like to find out more about what you are doing so that we can share it with others!

### **How will schools benefit from taking part in the research?**

By sharing your experiences, you will be contributing to the evidence base on how schools and trusts are supporting pupils who return following absence. We anticipate that these findings will be of interest to other schools and will also help policy makers to better understand what is working well and what additional support might be needed.

As a thank you, we are able to offer all participating schools £150 to use at their discretion.

### **How will NFER use and protect the data collected?**

The findings will be published as an accessible research report, offering recommendations for both policy and practice, which will be published on the NFER website in spring 2025. The interview data will be anonymised, and we will not name any individuals or schools in the final report.

Full details of how research participants' personal information will be collected, stored and used can be found in our privacy notice, which is on the [project web page](#).

### Who to contact?

If you have any questions or would like further information about the research, please contact the project team at [attendance@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:attendance@nfer.ac.uk).