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Voices from the classroom

Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence

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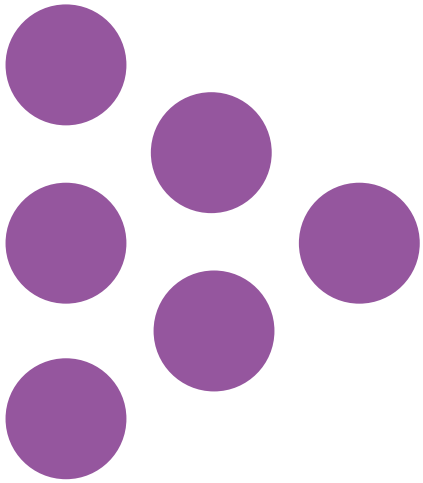

Voices from the classroom: Understanding how secondary schools support pupils returning from absence

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Key drivers of absence: Amongst our case study schools, illness, mental health challenges and term-time holidays were the most common reasons pupils missed school

Academic and social pressures can be a source of pupil anxiety: For some pupils this led to absence and/or made it more difficult for them to return to school due to concerns about catching up on work and re-engaging with peers.

Flexible support strategies used for reintegration: Schools reported using a 'toolbox' of tailored interventions, including pastoral support, one-to-one check-ins, and lesson catch-up, and adapted their approach based on pupil needs and attendance policies.

Seven key things we learnt about supporting attendance

Personalised support was valued by pupils: Pupils valued staff check-ins and support catching up on missed work but found some attendance practices unhelpful.

A positive school environment was felt to make a difference: Encouraging rather than punitive approaches, alongside wraparound support and inclusive policies, fostered a culture of belonging and attendance.

Strong relationships matter: Building positive, trusting relationships with pupils and parents and carers was essential for improving attendance and supporting reintegration after absence.

Accessing external support services was challenging: Schools reported struggling to access LA and CAMHS support, increasing the pressure to provide these services in-house.

The findings reflect the views of senior leaders, attendance champions, and pupils from nine secondary mainstream schools in England. Schools were chosen for their effective or innovative approaches to attendance. The interviews took place between November and December 2024.

Introduction

Maintaining high levels of pupil attendance, particularly in mainstream secondary schools, has become an increasingly complex challenge.

Levels of overall and persistent absence (those pupils missing 10% or more of school sessions), remain substantially higher than they were pre-pandemic, despite considerable policy focus on getting pupils back into school.

Data from the Department for Education (DfE) shows that overall absence rates in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools have increased from 4.5% in 2016/17 to 6.9% in 2023/24, while persistent absent rates have increased from 10.7% to 19.2% over the same period (Long and Roberts, 2025). This is worrying as attendance is strongly linked to educational outcomes and long-term pupil prospects (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024). Moreover, absence rates are more acute in secondary schools. For example, in 2024/25, the absence rate for state-funded primary schools was 5.2%, compared to 8.0% in state-funded secondary schools (DfE, 2025c). Some groups of pupils are more likely to be absent or persistently absent than others. For example, in 2022/23, 36.5% of free school meal-eligible pupils were persistently absent compared with 15.6% of pupils that were not eligible (Long and Roberts, 2025). Additionally, recent analysis of data from 126 schools (ImpactEd Evaluation, 2024) found that the strongest relationships between absence and pupil characteristics are intersectional. For example, female KS4 pupils with special educational needs (SEND) who were also receiving Pupil Premium had an average attendance rate of just 77% of available sessions.

Illness is one of the primary drivers for pupil absence.

Data from October 2024 shows that just over half of overall absence was due to illness, which accounted for 3.5% of possible sessions in autumn 2023/24 and 3.8% in spring 2023/24. This is a reduction compared to the combined terms for autumn and spring 2022/23 but remains higher than the pre-pandemic levels (DfE, 2024c).

However, this does not tell the whole story. As discussed in this report, the barriers to attendance are often multifaceted, and include:

- **Mental health issues**: The recent deterioration in pupil mental health has been well documented (Montero-Marin *et al.*, 2023) and has coincided with increases in school absence rates. These mental health-related difficulties have been exacerbated by long wait times for support (YMHC, 2023).
- **Socioeconomic factors**: Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by attendance issues (Sosu *et al.*, 2021). Factors such as housing instability, financial difficulties, and lack of access to resources and transport can hinder regular school attendance.
- **Parental attitudes and anxieties**: Shifts in parental attitudes towards the importance of daily school attendance, partly influenced by the pandemic, may have resulted in some parents and carers keeping their children at home more frequently (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023).

- **Term time holidays**: It has been suggested that increases in family holidays taken during term time since the pandemic are related to shifting parent and carer attitudes and increases in the cost of living (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023). The vast majority of fines for unauthorised absence (89%) are issued for term time holidays (DfE, 2024b).
- **School environment**: The school environment itself can impact attendance (Daily *et al.*, 2020). In a recent national survey of parents, the most common reason cited for children missing school was that they do not enjoy it (Norden, 2025). Issues such as bullying, lack of engagement with the curriculum, and inadequate support for special educational needs can discourage pupils from attending school regularly.

In response to these challenges, the government has implemented multiple policies aimed at improving attendance.

From the 2024/25 academic year, it became mandatory for schools to share daily attendance data with the DfE (DfE, 2024d). This initiative aims to create a comprehensive attendance dataset to identify and support pupils at risk of persistent absence. The government has also expanded the attendance hubs programme to 32 hubs across the country. Attendance hubs are led by senior leaders in schools with effective attendance practice. Through their hubs, lead schools share their strategies and resources for improving attendance (DfE, 2024a). Developed by Barnardo's and launched in September 2022, the government has also funded the attendance mentors initiative, which aims to tackle the factors behind non-attendance such as bullying and mental health issues, by pairing pupils and their families with mentors who provide guidance and support. A national framework for parental fines for unauthorised absences has also been introduced (DfE, 2024b). This includes increased fines to ensure consistency and accountability across local authorities. Other initiatives include the establishment of the Attendance Alliance, which brings together representatives from education, children's services, social services, and health sectors to improve school attendance, as well as the appointment of a national attendance ambassador to champion attendance and share effective practice.

Despite these efforts, absence rates remain stubbornly high, meaning there remains a critical need for more research on effective approaches to supporting pupil attendance. Our research aimed to understand what schools with good or improving attendance figures are currently doing to support pupils to return to school after absence. It also explored the factors which are important for a successful return to school, and pupils' views on the impact and effectiveness of school interventions. We hope our findings will offer insights into potential policy and practice solutions that contribute to ongoing efforts in creating inclusive and supportive school environments that facilitate attendance.

Method

Overview of approach to case studies

We undertook semi-structured face-to-face interviews with staff and pupils from nine state-funded secondary schools. Schools were purposively selected – as far as possible – for their effective or innovative approaches to attendance. Using administrative data, mainstream and non-selective schools were sampled on the basis that they had maintained above-average attendance rates before and after the pandemic or their absence rates had improved post-pandemic (i.e., between 2021-22 and 2022-23). Schools in the DfE's attendance or behaviour hubs programmes were also included. In each school we spoke to:

- one or more senior school leaders with responsibility for attendance
- one or more senior attendance champions or pastoral leads
- up to two groups of pupils, drawn from years 7-11, who had recently experienced periods of absence from school and were at risk of becoming persistently absent.

In total we spoke to 11 senior leaders, 11 senior attendance champions or pastoral leads and 85 pupils. Interviews and focus group were conducted in person between November and December 2024, with each lasting for approximately 30-45 minutes. Additionally, we interviewed a senior leader from another school, but we were unable to visit this school to conduct further interviews.

The use of semi-structured interview schedules ensured consistency of questioning across interviewees, whilst allowing for issues of relevance for individual respondents to be explored through follow-up questioning. Post-it note activities were used in the pupil focus groups to support discussion and facilitate participation. In addition, due to the ethical and safeguarding considerations of discussing potentially sensitive topics within a group setting, we used vignettes as discussion aids. These hypothetical but realistic scenarios allowed pupils to explore topics such as perceptions and experiences of absence due to illness, bullying, and mental health issues without having to disclose their own experiences.

While the qualitative findings offer valuable insights into how schools support pupils to return to school following absence, they should be interpreted with caution, as they are based on a small sample of schools. In addition, because schools were self-selected, and their attendance approaches could not be directly linked to pupil outcomes, the findings may not apply more widely.

NFER Teacher Voice Survey

Alongside the case-study visits, we also included three questions in NFER's Teacher Voice survey. This survey was administered in November 2024 and returned responses from 606 secondary teachers and leaders. Results were weighted by school-level factors including geographical region, school type and eligibility for free school meals to ensure they were statistically representative of schools nationally.

Analysis

Interviews were summarised and qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was employed to undertake systematic inductive thematic analysis (following Braun and Clarke, 2006) within the project's three key research questions (see Appendix 1), ensuring a structured and comprehensive approach to data analysis and interpretation.

Key findings

1 Illness, mental health, and term-time holidays were the key drivers of absence

To provide context for the types of support schools offered to pupils upon their return, we first explored the key drivers of absence in our nine case study schools. We also explored what pupils viewed as legitimate reasons for absence. School staff identified mental health issues, illness and term-time holidays as the primary reasons for pupil absence in their schools, which are discussed in detail below. Understanding these factors helped frame how schools tailored their support to meet pupils' needs.

1.1 Declining pupil mental health

All the schools we spoke to highlighted the challenges posed by pupil mental health and its strong link to absenteeism. Anxiety specifically appeared to be the biggest concern, with most schools reporting a noticeable increase in anxiety-related issues among pupils since the pandemic.

School staff described anxiety as manifesting in different ways, often existing on a spectrum. At one end, were small groups of pupils where anxiety was significantly impacting pupils' ability to attend school at all. These pupils were frequently classified as persistently absent, missing 10% or more of school sessions, and often required intensive support. In the middle of the spectrum were students experiencing exam-related anxiety, with school staff noting that stress levels tended to rise as pupils progressed through secondary school, particularly in the lead-up to GCSEs. At the other end of the spectrum were pupils who appeared to struggle with everyday setbacks or challenges and reported that these experiences significantly impacted their mental wellbeing. For these pupils, school staff talked about the importance of building resilience to help them manage these challenges.

School staff reported challenges related to the language used to describe pupils' mental health and related expectations. On the one hand, there was broad recognition that some pupils faced significant, acute mental health difficulties that required appropriate, targeted support. These included pupils experiencing severe anxiety, depression, or other diagnosed conditions that had a profound impact on their ability to attend school and engage in learning.

> *"We've had examples of where the students are so riddled with anxiety, they can't even put their uniform on. So we've tried an approach where they put their uniform on, and they sat in their mum's car, and then go back into the house. The next day they drive to the school car park and then go back to the house. And we've done this slowly and tailored to the needs of the children".* [Senior Leader]

On the other hand, staff expressed concerns about the broader use of mental health terminology among pupils. They noted a growing tendency for some pupils to describe any form of everyday personal challenge—such as academic stress, friendship issues, or minor setbacks—as negatively affecting their mental health. While they acknowledged the importance of validating pupils' feelings and fostering a supportive environment, some staff worried that this shift in language risked blurring the distinction between everyday difficulties and emotions, and clinically significant mental health conditions. This led some staff to feel that a more nuanced conversation was needed around resilience, coping strategies, and when professional mental health support was necessary.

> *"The social narrative around anxiety has been something that we've had to try and get a grasp of - challenging parents when they say their child is off with anxiety. Is that a medically diagnosed condition? If it is, that's fine and we'll work with that. If it's not, please don't use that language".* [Senior Leader]

> *"Routine is incredibly important for young people, and so those students who have those mental health difficulties, you actually have to have very tough conversations with families and say we understand it's really, really difficult to get them in into school. Because even with students with diagnosed medical conditions, we have to be frank, because life's still coming for them, and they still need to have an education. They still need to be able to come in. We need to be able to provide special arrangements and adaptations, but they have to be in through that door in order to be able to access those."* [Senior Leader]

Schools adopted a range of strategies to address these challenges as discussed in Chapter 3.

1.2 Changing thresholds for illness and the role of home working

Pupils have always missed school legitimately due to illness. However, school staff felt there were four key reasons why absence rates due to illness have increased since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Firstly, school staff observed a lowered threshold for taking a day off sick. In their view, pupils are now more likely to stay home for mild illnesses, such as coughs and colds, whereas they might have previously attended school with these symptoms. This perception was reinforced in the pupil focus groups, where views varied on what level of illness justified an absence. Some pupils felt that even mild illnesses were a valid reason to stay home, while others believed that only more severe symptoms, such as vomiting or a high fever, warranted time off.

Secondly, there were indications that pandemic-era messaging about preventing the spread of illness continues to shape parents'/carers' and pupils' attitudes toward attendance. Some pupils also expressed a belief that staying home when contagious was not just about personal wellbeing but also a responsibility to protect others from infection. However, for minor coughs and colds school staff felt pupils should be in school. These findings suggest that further efforts may be needed to shift mindsets around illness and school attendance, ensuring that both parents/carers and pupils feel confident making informed decisions about when a child should stay home and when they can still attend school.

> *"If you're ill and have something you can spread to other people then it's definitely important to stay off school, because you'll get more absence if you go into school as you'll spread it to those other people."* [Pupil]

Thirdly, school staff believed that the shift towards parents and carers working from home has made it easier for pupils to miss school. Since many parents and carers no longer need to take time off work to supervise a sick child, some schools staff felt that they may be more inclined to allow their child to stay home, even for minor illnesses. This suggests that increased flexibility in parent and carer work arrangements may facilitate absence by inadvertently lowering the barriers to school absence.

> *"Post-pandemic a significant number of people are working from home and that makes it easier for a child to be at home. Whereas in previous years, or in other households where people have got to physically go to work, you can't be poorly 'cause then someone's got to have a day off."* [Senior Leader]

Finally, school staff observed that the pandemic led to families spending more time together at home, strengthening attachment between parents and carers and their children. As a result, some pupils have become more accustomed to being at home and may feel more comfortable staying there, even when they could attend school. This heightened attachment and familiarity with the home environment was felt to be contributing to increased school absences.

1.3 Term-time holidays

School staff reported that, although term-time holidays account for a smaller proportion of overall absences than mental health difficulties or illness, they have increasingly become a problem for most schools. While many families were reported to be choosing to take holidays during term time for financial or personal reasons, school staff reported this was negatively impacting pupil attendance and learning. School staff reported that while some parents and carers were not aware of the rules, whereby if a holiday is unauthorised, the school can refer the case to the LA, they felt

that most of the parents and carers taking term-time holidays had calculated that the cost of the holiday and the fine would still be less than the price of a holiday taken during school holidays.

> *"Requests for holidays have gone through the roof…this is down to the cost of going abroad. This has increased significantly since 2021."* [Senior Leader]

> *"We get feedback that paying for the holiday and the fine is still cheaper than paying for the holiday when schools are closed".* [Attendance Lead]

LAs are responsible for deciding when to issue fines to parents and carers, meaning the process varies by council. However, under national rules, all schools must consider issuing a fine if a child has missed 10 or more sessions (five days) of school for unauthorised reasons. From August 2024, the fine for unauthorised school absences is £80 per child if paid within 21 days or £160 if paid within 28 days (DfE, 2024b).

While most of the schools we spoke to appeared to take a hard line to this and always issued fines (Penalty Notices) to parents and carers for term-time holidays, a small number of schools reported taking a more sympathetic stance. For example, one trust had decided not to fine parents and carers for term-time holidays unless their child's attendance was below 96% in the previous academic year and had found that in some cases this had helped improve attendance.

> *"We want to work with those parents that are making the difference, and we have seen some families improve because they want to take a 5-day break... we are trying to find a balance."* [Attendance Lead]

The pupils we spoke to expressed mixed views on term-time holidays. Those that felt it was inappropriate to miss school for a holiday, cited missed schoolwork and not everyone being able to afford to go on holiday as key reasons. Others felt the decision should be up to their parents and carers and that term-time holidays were justified particularly if the absence was short, it was their only holiday that year, and if their overall attendance was good.

> *"It's your education, if you miss lessons in your GCSE topic then you're going to have to learn yourself and that's going to negatively impact you, and if that comes up as an important question on your GCSE then you might not know the content."* [Pupil]

> *"If your parents would like to take you on a trip and you don't go places [very often] it should be pretty acceptable if your parents have saved up money to take you somewhere."* [Pupil]

Term-time holidays were most commonly reported at the start or end of term, or on Fridays, with parents and carers often extending weekends or holiday periods. At least one school noted a

reduction in term-time holidays after increasing the number of fines issued. However, schools also highlighted inconsistencies between LAs in their approach to the issuing of fines, which was said to create uncertainty within school communities, particularly where households had children attending different schools in neighbouring authorities.

2 Schoolwork and social pressures made returning to school harder for anxious pupils

One of the key things we sought to explore was how pupils feel during absence from school and whether these feelings varied depending on the reason for their absence and their school's attendance policy.

As discussed in the previous section, school staff in our study identified declining pupil mental health, and particularly anxiety, to be a key driver of increased absence. Pupils widely agreed that missing school due to mental health difficulties was acceptable, particularly as many saw school itself as a source of anxiety. They noted that feelings of school-related anxiety could not only lead to absence but also make it harder to return after being away for another reason.

> *"Home is a place where you trust, where you find relaxation, if you're at school - somewhere where you don't like, the stress is going to build up and build up more until you break."* [Pupil]

The main anxieties pupils reported experiencing about school could be broadly grouped into two categories:

1. Worries about schoolwork and exams

The pressure of trying to keep up with schoolwork—or falling behind— was a key concern for pupils. This was particularly true for those in their GCSE years, who already found it challenging to manage homework and revision without also having to catch up on missed lessons. Pupils worried that gaps in their knowledge due to absence could negatively affect their exam performance, increasing their stress and anxiety.

2. Worries about the reaction of other pupils and school staff

Pupils were generally happy for their friends or a key school staff member to check-in with them following absence, as this felt supportive. However, they expressed anxiety about being questioned by other pupils—especially if they had been absent for a sensitive reason. Being repeatedly asked by pupils they did not know well where they had been and why they had missed school could make them feel uncomfortable.

> *"Because if you're, like, gone for three weeks, there's going to be like a big reason why you didn't come* [into school]*. Then because you haven't been there for three weeks, everyone's probably going to ask, and you just probably want to keep it a secret."* [Pupil]

> *"I think when the teacher asks the student why they weren't here, they should ask them in more like a private area…like outside the classroom or something because we were able to hear everything."* [Pupil]

Similarly, while pupils appreciated a single, supportive check-in from a staff member they knew, some schools had policies requiring staff to ask pupils about their absence. In these schools, pupils reported being questioned multiple times by different teachers, which some found unhelpful

and frustrating. They felt that information about their absence should be shared among staff to avoid repeated questioning. Additionally, some pupils described feeling uncomfortable when teachers stopped them in corridors or questioned them in class about their absence, particularly if the reason was personal (e.g., family difficulties). Furthermore, being asked in front of peers made them feel exposed, adding to their anxiety about returning to school.

2.1 The reason for and length of absence could make returning to school more difficult

Pupils felt that returning to school after a short illness was relatively easy because it was a common experience and widely understood as 'normal.' Similarly, they believed that coming back after a holiday was straightforward, as they had been away for an enjoyable and relaxing reason, leaving them feeling refreshed and ready to return.

However, pupils reported that it can be much harder to come back after absences related to personal or sensitive circumstances, such as family difficulties, caring responsibilities, or other private matters they did not wish to discuss. Their main reasons for finding this more difficult was being questioned by teachers or peers outside their close friendship groups, which could make them feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. The fear of having to explain their absence—or of others making assumptions about it—added to their anxiety and reluctance to return.

> *"It's easier if it's like a holiday or something… if it's something to do with at home then it can be harder, especially if like other people are prying to find out [why you have been off]."* [Pupil]

There was consensus among pupils that the longer they were absent from school, the harder it became to return. They identified three reasons for this:

1. **Falling further behind on schoolwork** – The longer they were away, the more work they missed, making it overwhelming to catch up upon their return.
2. **Changes within friendship groups** – Longer absences were felt to increase the likelihood of social shifts, such as friends forming new friendships, which could make social reintegration more challenging.
3. **Becoming accustomed to being at home** – Extended time away from school made pupils more comfortable in their home environment, making the transition back to structured routines and expectations more difficult.

School staff also highlighted that the reason for absence played a significant role in how easily pupils could reintegrate. Generally, they felt that pupils returning from a short illness were able to settle back into school relatively quickly. However, they found it much more challenging to support pupils returning after absences linked to mental health difficulties. Staff observed that pupils with anxiety or other mental health concerns often faced a particularly difficult cycle of emotions: they felt anxious about returning, then experienced even greater anxiety when faced with the work they had missed. This often led to further absence, creating a repeating pattern of school avoidance that became increasingly difficult to break.

"If people are ill, they will they come back and they move on, they're very good, [it] is easier for them to catch-up with their work." [Senior Leader]

"It's such a doubled edged sword because you get them [pupils off for mental health reasons] back in and they're behind. Quite often these pupils [are] dysregulated and struggle with other aspects of school life as well. They can't catch-up, they're distracted in lessons, they become more anxious." [Attendance Lead]

3 Schools used a 'toolbox' of support options to help pupils return to school, tailoring them to pupil needs and attendance policies

Staff in our case study schools recognised that the reasons for absence were varied and complex. In response, schools implemented a range of support strategies—referred to here as a 'toolbox' of support options—to help pupils reintegrate following an absence. These support options included:

- Pastoral support and counselling.
- One-to-one check-ins with pupils.
- Support for missed lessons.
- Building relationships with key staff members.
- Home visits.
- Reduced timetables (in limited circumstances).
- External referrals.
- Alternative provision.

In addition to the case study visits, we conducted a national survey of teachers in state-funded secondary schools to gather more generalisable data on how schools support pupils returning from absence. The findings, discussed later in this chapter, largely reflect the variety of approaches outlined above but also provide additional insights into their prevalence and perceived effectiveness.

3.1 Tailoring support to pupil needs

School staff consistently emphasised the importance of adopting a supportive, individualised approach to helping pupils return to school. They stressed that tailoring support to each pupil's specific needs and circumstances was crucial in addressing the root causes of absence effectively.

A key part of this process involved **taking the time to understand the underlying issues** behind a pupil's absence. This was typically done through **one-to-one support from a designated staff member** who could build a trusted relationship with both the pupil and their parents or carers. In many cases, this role was fulfilled by a member of the school's attendance team.

> *"It comes down to the individuality of the pupil, and the individuality of the students' needs. And finding the best member of staff to try to reduce the barriers long term…we look at the underlying issues for each child."* [Attendance Lead]

Schools also recognised the importance of **carefully matching pupils with the right staff member** to ensure they felt comfortable and supported. Having a **single, consistent point of**

contact allowed pupils to develop a sense of trust and reassurance, making it easier for them to seek help when needed.

Decisions about the specific support offered to individual pupils were typically made during **attendance-focused meetings** involving key staff members from across the school. These meetings brought together a range of perspectives to ensure a **holistic understanding of the pupil's needs** and to develop a coordinated response. Attendees often included Heads of Year, members of the attendance team, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo), the Safeguarding Lead, and representatives from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). By involving staff with different areas of expertise, schools aimed to identify the most appropriate support strategies, considering not only attendance concerns but also wider factors such as mental health, safeguarding, special educational needs, and family circumstances.

Most of the pupils we spoke to felt that their schools provided effective support for mental health-related issues, particularly when they needed short-term adjustments to help them cope. Pupils who had accessed these support mechanisms particularly valued having quiet workspaces where they could focus without distraction, as well as the option for temporary time away from mainstream classes. These provisions were seen as helpful in managing anxiety, allowing them to gradually reintegrate into the classroom environment at a pace that felt comfortable.

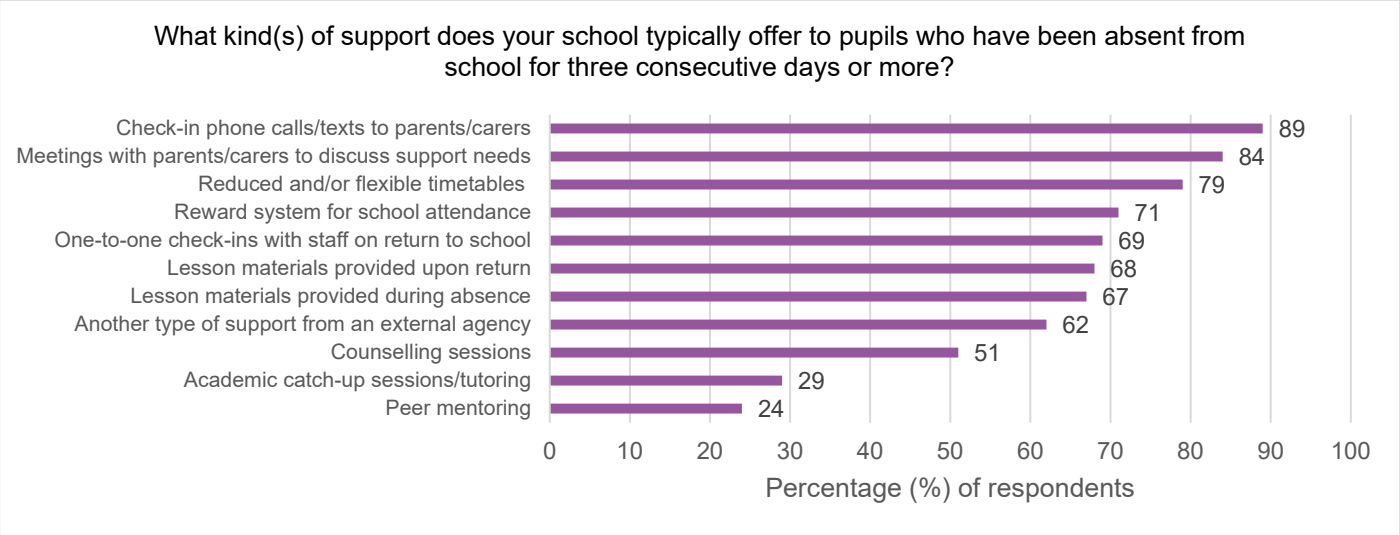
That said, some pupils felt that while schools had good systems in place, some teachers were more understanding and supportive than others, and there was a suggestion that pupils' experience of support could depend heavily on the attitudes and response of individual staff members. Overall, while most pupils appreciated the mental health support available to them, they also recognised that more could be done to create an environment where stress and anxiety were minimised rather than just managed.

Combining insights: national survey findings on attendance support

In addition to qualitative insights from nine case study schools, we conducted a national survey of teachers in state-funded secondary schools to gather more generalisable data on how schools support pupils returning to school following absence.

The survey, carried out in November 2024, received responses from 606 teachers and senior leaders. The findings were weighted by school-level factors including geographical region, school type and eligibility for free school meals to ensure they were statistically representative of schools nationally. The survey focussed specifically on support that was offered to pupils who were absent for three consecutive days or more.

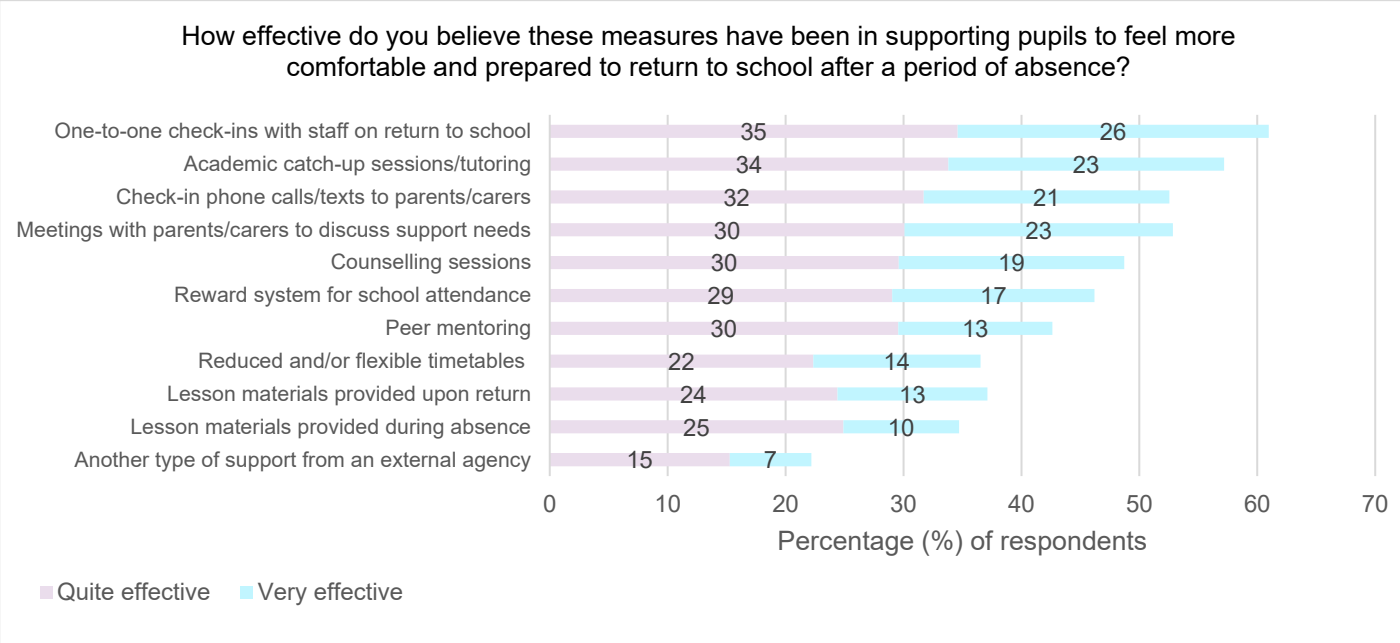
Finding 1: Schools offer a range of different forms of support to absent pupils, with most engaging with parents and carers through phone calls or face-to face meetings



N=606
The percentages in this graph are weighted separately by FSM rates. Reported base sizes (N) are unweighted.
Source: NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey, November 2024.

Finding 2: Schools varied in how widely they implemented different attendance support strategies.
Teachers were more likely to report that reward systems, lesson materials (provided both during absence and upon return) and check-in phone calls and texts with parents were used with the majority of pupils (more than 50%). By contrast, flexible and/or reduced pupil timetables, peer mentoring and counselling sessions were reported to be used with fewer than 10% of pupils.

Finding 3: Views differed on which attendance support strategies were most and least effective in helping pupils to feel more comfortable and prepared to return to school after a period of absence.
One-to-one check ins with parents and academic catch-up sessions were perceived to be the most effective, with 61% and 57% respectively reporting they were ‘quite’ or ‘very’ effective. By contrast, lessons materials provided upon return (37%), reduced and flexible timetables (36%), and lesson materials provided during absence (35%) were amongst the options least likely to be perceived as effective.



N=151-533
The percentages in this graph are weighted separately by FSM rates. Reported base sizes (N) are unweighted.
Source: NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey, November 2024.

3.2 The role of funding, school community, and attendance policies in the support options offered

In addition to considering individual pupil needs, schools' decisions about which support options to offer—and the order in which they implemented them—were influenced by several factors. These included available funding, the needs of the wider school community, and school attendance policies. Two key areas where schools differed in their support approach were home visits and strategies for helping pupils catch up on missed work.

Home visits

Schools varied in both the timing and frequency of home visits. **Some schools conducted home visits early in an absence, believing this helped prevent issues from escalating.** These schools were more commonly located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, where pupils often faced more complex home circumstances. In these contexts, **safeguarding concerns** were a key driver for prioritising home visits, leading these schools to use them more frequently and more swiftly than others.

> *"The school carries out home visits every day. The safeguarding and attendance team constantly track where children are. Relationships with families were built over the Covid period. Every child had a phone call once a week. If we didn't speak to the child, and we spoke to the parent, we visited to make sure the children were okay. We broke so many Covid rules, but it was safeguarding. It told the parents 'we care about you'."* [Headteacher]

In contrast, **schools where safeguarding issues were less prevalent were less likely to view home visits as necessary or a good use of time and resources.** Additionally, schools with lower numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) highlighted funding constraints as a barrier to offering more home visits and targeted support. Because these schools received less pupil premium funding, they had fewer resources to allocate to attendance interventions. Staff in these schools expressed a clear desire to increase home visits and provide more tailored support to socio-economically disadvantaged pupils if additional funding were available.

Support for missed lessons

Another key area where schools differed was their approach to supporting pupils to catch-up on missed work.

One group of schools **deliberately chose not to send work home** when pupils were absent. Their reasoning was that if a pupil was well enough to complete schoolwork at home, they were well enough to attend school. These schools also wanted to **discourage a culture**

> *"Some parents, I think their attitude is, because they could work from home when it was COVID, if they're off ill, they ask us to send [their children] the work and they will do it. But my attitude is, if they can do the work sat at home, they can do it sat in school…we don't want to be part of that truancy."* [Attendance Lead]

of remote learning and reinforce the expectation that pupils should be physically present in school to access their education.

In contrast, other schools **uploaded lesson materials to online platforms**, allowing pupils to catch up independently. Among these schools, some set deadlines for completing missed work, aiming to ensure that pupils remained on track with their learning. Others left it up to the pupils to take responsibility for catching up at their own pace.

School staff across all approaches acknowledged that **catching up on missed learning could be challenging for pupils**. However, in some cases, this difficulty was seen as a **deterrent to future absences**, reinforcing the expectation that attending school was the best way to keep up with academic progress.

Pupils' perceptions of the value and effectiveness of support for missed lessons are explored in Chapter 4.

"I think we have to be frank with the kids and we say this in assemblies - there's no alternative to being in the classroom. So yes, you are off, but you're not actually going to be able to catch up with that work. And so, I think that's really key because I think there was a narrative, built up over the pandemic of, you know, the catch-up funding and all that kind of stuff. Well, actually catch up isn't really a thing. And so, I think we actually tackle that narrative." [Senior Leader]

3.2 The burden of managing attendance: workload and resource challenges

School staff reported facing significant workload challenges managing pupil attendance, with staff reporting that tracking absences, following up with families, and implementing interventions all require substantial time and resources. Most had implemented detailed tracking systems and proactive outreach strategies, such as home visits and early-morning phone calls, but these efforts were labour-intensive and required dedicated staffing. Additionally, administrative burdens, such as documenting interventions for the administration of LA-issued penalty notices, added further strain. To manage this increased workload, most schools we visited had created attendance teams of comprising attendance officers, pastoral staff, and senior leaders. However, these staff members often had to balance these responsibilities alongside other duties, raising concerns about capacity. In some cases, staff were redeployed from other roles to focus on attendance, which in turn reduced capacity elsewhere. This highlights that while schools are striving to provide individualised support to improve pupil attendance, these efforts come with significant time and resource implications.

4 Pupils valued staff check-ins and support for missed work but found some attendance practices unhelpful

4.1 Pupils found check-ins on returning to school helpful

Pupils highlighted that **having someone they could talk to about any issues** makes it easier for them to return to school after an absence**.** While many relied on friends for support, they also identified trusted adults within their schools whom they felt comfortable speaking to when needed. The specific roles of these staff members varied between schools but often included Heads of Year, form tutors, favourite teachers, pastoral staff, and staff running extracurricular activities. What these individuals had in common was that **they were people pupils knew well and felt would take the time to listen to them**.

In schools where one-to-one check-ins were offered upon a pupil's return, pupils found them helpful and reassuring, appreciating the effort staff made to check on their well-being. They **also valued teachers welcoming them back warmly**, noting that when staff took the time to acknowledge their return, they were **more likely to notice if something was wrong** and offer further support if needed.

> *"They'll notice if something is going on. And they will ask you, like, just to make sure that everything is ok."* [Pupil]

> *"Sometimes I've had teachers come and see how I'm doing, see if I'm alright, checking up with you. My tutor has done it a couple of times, [Attendance Lead] has done it a couple of times, safeguarding have asked if everything is alright, why I wasn't at school. They sit and have a conversation with you, they don't shout in your face."* [Pupil]

In schools where these types of check-ins were not provided or were only offered to pupils returning from exclusions, pupils were more likely to feel that they did not receive support when returning to school (see below).

4.2 There were mixed views about the support pupils received to help them with missed work

Catching up on missed work was one of the biggest concerns for pupils both during and after an absence. Across the focus groups, pupils had mixed views on the support they received, which were strongly linked to their school's policy in this area.

In schools where missed work was uploaded online (e.g., via an online portal), signposted through online resources (e.g., BBC Bitesize or Maths Watch), or provided as worksheets by class teachers, pupils generally found this support helpful. **They particularly appreciated it when teachers took the time to explain what they had missed**. In these schools, there was often an expectation that pupils would complete the work, and most were willing to do so.

However, pupils noted that not all classmates engaged with the work, and some found online resources unhelpful. Additionally, there were inconsistencies in how well schools implemented these policies. Some pupils felt that only certain teachers—those they felt genuinely cared about their learning—consistently provided missed work online, while others did not.

> *"We have Google classroom so some teachers will put on what we've missed during the lessons. So if it was physics, it would be electromagnetic energy, if we've missed out that lesson. So we are notified if we've missed a lesson."* [Pupil]

In schools **where missed work was not routinely provided, pupils found it difficult to catch up,** which often led to them being unsure of what was happening in class. This uncertainty could lead to anxiety and, in some cases, disciplinary consequences if they were unable to complete work they did not understand.

When pupils in these schools wanted to catch up, they reported that **asking teachers for help was challenging**. Some struggled because teachers were unavailable or too busy, while others said that help was refused outright. As a result, some pupils felt uncomfortable approaching teachers for support. Instead, they relied on friends for help or simply struggled on their own.

> *"Basically, we have to speak to a teacher [about missed work] during break or lunch, but then when we try to speak to them, we're not allowed because it's their break and lunch. You have to like beg them."* [Pupil]

> *"Personally, I don't like asking for help. If I was off ill for a week, I would just get on with it, and maybe struggle, but I wouldn't want to say that I need help."* [Pupil]

Across the focus groups there was strong consensus **that pupils wanted more support to help them catch-up on missed work after an absence**. In particular, pupils expressed a need for individual support, as they often struggled to understand the material even when work was provided. Many felt they needed someone to sit down with them to explain key concepts and ensure they could fully engage with their learning.

> *"Because like looking at a sheet and having like steps and answers isn't going to help because you're thinking, well, how did they get to that process? So it's better to have someone there to teach you easier ways or just generally teach you because it helps a student."* [Pupil]

However, pupils also acknowledged the challenges teachers faced, recognising that they had entire classes to manage and teach, so could not always provide individual support.

They also noted that while being taken out of class to catch up on missed work could be helpful, it often meant falling behind in the new lesson, which they felt was not always a practical solution.

"There's not much they [the teachers] can do. They can't keep coming to you to catch you up on the lesson before because they have to teach the rest of the class to, so it relies on yourself really." [Pupil]

"When you get pulled out of lesson to catch up, then you're still behind on the lesson that they have just done" [Pupil]

4.3 Some pupils felt they did not receive any support following absence

Although all our case study schools reported providing a wide range of support options to pupils following absence, **some pupils still felt they received no support when they returned to school.** These pupils were more likely to feel that their school did not care about them because no-one checked if they were ok or helped them with any work they had missed. There was also a **perception of unequal support**, with some pupils believing that help was primarily given to certain groups, such as those with special educational needs, while others were left to manage on their own. Pupils felt that all students should receive similar support, as some may be struggling with personal challenges that teachers are unaware of, simply because they are too afraid to ask for help.

[Talking about differential support offered to pupils with and without SEND] *"If you're just like a normal student that's been off because of family problems, they'll just forget about you, and go to the other students - you're just forgotten."* [Pupil]

"There are people who are struggling, and they aren't getting any support. But then there was me - like if I came to school more than three days I was like, yay, yay! I mean it was nice, but like it was too much." [Pupil]

4.4 Some aspects of school attendance practices were seen as unhelpful

Repeated questioning about absence was felt to be unhelpful, and more care is needed in how and where pupils are questioned.

While pupils appreciated one-to-one check-ins with trusted staff members when they returned to school, many found repeated questioning about their absence frustrating and anxiety-inducing. In some schools, pupils reported being asked multiple times by different staff members why they had

been absent. While they understood that staff needed to monitor attendance, they felt that having to explain their absence repeatedly—especially if it was for a personal or sensitive reason—was uncomfortable and, at times, distressing.

Additionally, pupils highlighted concerns about where and how these conversations took place. Being questioned in busy corridors, classrooms, or other public areas where peers could overhear was particularly difficult, especially if their absence was due to personal issues such as family difficulties or mental health struggles. They felt that schools should take greater care in choosing private and appropriate locations for these discussions to protect their privacy and emotional wellbeing.

Pupils also expressed frustration that information about their absences did not always appear to be shared between staff members. They felt that if they had already explained their absence to one member of staff, this information should be passed on where appropriate to prevent them from having to repeat themselves multiple times. This was particularly important for pupils dealing with difficult personal circumstances, as having to recount their situation repeatedly could be emotionally draining, distressing, and even deter them from seeking support in the future.

Overall, pupils felt that schools should adopt a more sensitive and coordinated approach when addressing absences, ensuring that questioning is discreet, necessary, and handled with empathy.

Being surrounded by statistics about attendance and academic attainment can increase anxiety for pupils

Pupils were highly aware of their schools' attendance expectations and the emphasis on the link between attendance and academic attainment. They frequently received reminders—both verbally (e.g. in assemblies and form time), and through visual materials (e.g. posters and postcards)—about the impact of poor attendance on their GCSE outcomes.

However, while schools aimed to motivate pupils to attend regularly, some aspects of this approach were seen as counterproductive or anxiety-inducing. Some pupils reported feeling pressured to attend school even when they were genuinely unwell, as both they and their parents or carers feared the consequences of absence.

In addition, pupils highlighted that the constant presence of attendance-focused messaging could be overwhelming. Many schools displayed attendance statistics, posters, and infographics on walls and in classrooms, reinforcing the direct correlation between attendance rates and GCSE performance. While these materials were intended to encourage good attendance, some pupils—particularly those with anxiety or existing attendance concerns—found them stressful and discouraging rather than motivating.

Pupils noted that they were already fully aware of the importance of attendance and that being surrounded by these reminders did not help but instead added to their anxiety. They suggested that a more supportive and less pressure-driven approach—one that acknowledges individual

circumstances and promotes well-being alongside attendance—would be more beneficial. Pupils also noted that some of the language used around attendance and on these posters (e.g., 'poor', 'very poor') was unhelpful and not necessarily in-keeping with the school's wider ethos.

> *"They have statistics everywhere – if you are 5 mins late you miss X, Y, Z days of school…I think that they try and scare you a bit because there are often statistics up like if you miss such and such amount of time off school then your grade lowers on average by 1, 2, 3 points."* [Pupil]

> *"It's not helpful as to people with anxiety once they come into school and see that poster [with attendance and grade statistics], they will be much more scared."* [Pupil]

Including suspensions in attendance figures can create a cycle of punishment and disengagement

Pupils who had experienced suspension from school felt strongly that time spent away from school due to suspension should not be counted in their attendance records. They believed this practice was unfair because their absence was not voluntary—they were explicitly told not to attend.

Pupils reported that including suspension days in attendance calculations led to a frustrating and discouraging cycle. Being suspended for poor behaviour immediately lowered their attendance percentage, which then put them at risk of further consequences for poor attendance when they returned. Some pupils described how this made them feel trapped in a negative loop, where their initial suspension resulted in additional disciplinary action, creating a sense of hopelessness.

For some pupils, this reduced their motivation to return to school at all. They felt that since they were already being penalised for behaviour, and then further penalised for attendance, there was little incentive to try to re-engage positively with school life. This was especially true for pupils who already felt disengaged or struggled with school routines.

Pupils suggested that a more supportive approach—one that focused on helping them reintegrate after a suspension rather than further penalising them—would be more effective in encouraging them to attend and improving their overall behaviour. However, it is important to note that schools are required to record suspensions as absences.

> *"They exclude me and then still count it as my being off and then say it's bad attendance. If I've been poorly for two days and I've got bad attendance then fair enough, but if I don't come into school cos they've told me not to, then they're saying I've missed two days, it's harsh."* [Pupil]

5 A welcoming environment, strong pastoral care, and pupil incentives were felt to support good attendance

The support approaches schools chose to offer pupils returning from absence were closely linked to their school-wide strategies for fostering a positive school culture. Creating a welcoming environment where pupils felt supported and motivated to stay engaged with their education was central to our case study schools achieving their high attendance expectations. School staff highlighted that strong pastoral care, the use of incentives and providing pupils with something to look forward to, could be particularly effective in preventing disengagement from school in the first place.

5.1 Creating a welcoming environment

School staff reported that creating an environment where pupils want to come to school is essential for encouraging attendance. This was particularly important in schools serving **communities with high socio-economic disadvantage**, where pupils and their families often faced complex home circumstances that could create significant barriers to attendance.

One key strategy for fostering **a sense of belonging and community** was ensuring that school policies, curriculum, and extracurricular activities aligned with the culture they wanted to create. Schools took different approaches to achieve this, including:

- **Embedding a supportive attendance and behaviour policy** that reinforced positive engagement rather than focusing solely on punishment.
- **Providing a diverse curriculum and extracurricular activities** (see Section 4.3) that made school feel relevant and enjoyable for all pupils.
- **Offering wrap-around pastoral support** (see Section 4.2) to address pupils' wider well-being needs.
- **Opening the school site early and running homework clubs** to provide a safe and supportive space outside of lessons.
- **Providing essential items such as clothing and equipment** to ensure that no pupil felt disadvantaged compared to their peers.

These efforts aimed to make school a place where pupils **felt valued, supported, and motivated to attend regularly**.

"We give all students a laptop. We give all students basically what they need to make sure they don't feel disadvantaged against others, and that's important too, because if your son is coming into school without a pair of shoes on, you're not going to come into school because you're going to feel embarrassed."

[Senior Leader]

"I think ultimately, it's really about creating that sense of belonging. I think that's the magic key to unlocking attendance…Because that's what is ultimately going to drive the students to be back in and to be happy about being back in."

[Senior Leader]

Furthermore, some schools took **proactive steps to make pupils feel welcome even before they officially joined**, helping to establish a sense of belonging early on.

For example, one school reported that **all Year 6 pupils transitioning from primary school received a welcome gift** along with a **personalised letter from their new form tutor**. This small but meaningful gesture was designed to help pupils feel valued, reduce anxiety about the transition, and create an immediate sense of connection with their new school community.

"I think the most important thing we do is that before any pupil arrives at this school from primary, we visit every home and take a gift. They get free books, water bottle, free tie, badge. We do that a week before Year 6 parents' evening which is early July...We have kids hanging out the doors waiting for us." [Headteacher]

5.2 Providing strong pastoral support

School staff consistently emphasised that **strong pastoral support was essential for promoting good attendance**, particularly considering the **rising prevalence of pupil mental health difficulties** and **long waiting lists for external services** (see Chapters 1 and 7). As a result, **counselling and mental health support** had become core elements of schools' pastoral provision.

Schools reported offering a **range of in-house and external support options**, including:

- **Pastoral staff, counsellors, and school nurses** providing direct support within the school.
- **Online counselling apps**, where pupils could send text messages to trained professionals for support when needed.
- **External mentoring services**, such as those provided by Barnardo's.
- **Peer mentoring programmes**, where older or trained pupils supported their peers.

Beyond supporting pupils directly, **schools also worked closely with families to address barriers to attendance and strengthen home-school relationships**. This included:

1. **Providing financial support** to help with school uniform, transport, and lunches for families in need.
2. **Employing in-house social workers** to offer targeted family support.
3. **Running parenting groups** for those struggling to ensure their child attended school.
4. **Carrying out home visits**, in some cases not only to check in on pupils but also to physically bring them to school.

These **wraparound support strategies** were seen as vital in addressing both **practical and emotional barriers to attendance**, ensuring that pupils felt supported, and families were engaged in their child's education.

5.3 Adapting the curriculum to ensure pupils have something to look forward to

School staff recognised that not all pupils will enjoy or excel at academic subjects and consistently talked about the importance of pupils having something they could look forward to during the school day to encourage attendance.

Most schools addressed this by offering a **broad and balanced curriculum**, which included:

- A range of subjects beyond EBacc such as performing arts, sports, and vocational options.
- A diverse selection of extracurricular activities, allowing pupils to engage in areas of interest beyond the classroom.

Schools making substantial curriculum changes

A subset of schools—primarily in the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas, serving pupils with the most complex home circumstances—went further in adapting their curriculum to promote engagement. In these schools, a **child-centred approach and pupil wellbeing were prioritised over a strict focus on EBacc subjects**, with the goal of getting pupils into school, helping them succeed, and ensuring they enjoyed their education.

These schools made several key adaptations, including:

- **Expanding GCSE and vocational options**, offering greater flexibility and choice and less emphasis on EBacc subjects.
- **Reducing the number of GCSEs (and/or vocational qualifications) pupils were required to take** to ease exam pressure.
- **Providing multiple GCSE pathways**, allowing for a more personalised balance of subjects.
- **Offering on-site alternative provision**, where pupils could engage in a broad range of activities tailored to their interests and strengths.

Impact on engagement and attendance

Staff in these schools strongly believed that making these curriculum changes had led to improved pupil engagement and attendance. Similarly, pupils in these schools spoke positively about having more choice over their subjects, with many expressing that these changes made school feel more relevant and enjoyable for them.

> *"I was asked at our last Ofsted what our EBacc ambition is. We want the top end of our kids to do languages, but I'm not going to force them. I'd rather have them in school and succeeding. It's about that personal approach to careers and options."* [Senior Leader]

> *"The fact we got given pathways for our options* [is really helpful]. *They are different colours, and they give you different things to pick. The blue one can be helpful for some people because it takes stress off them, makes them less anxious, just helps them out."* [Pupil]

In contrast, **pupils in schools with a narrower curriculum structure reported feeling less motivated to attend school**—particularly on days when their timetable was filled with subjects and/or teachers they did not enjoy. These pupils expressed a desire for greater opportunities to focus on subjects they were passionate about, believing that this would make them more likely to attend and engage in their learning.

Beyond subject choice, pupils also emphasised that **the way lessons were taught was just as important as what was being taught**. They wanted lessons to be more engaging and interactive—rather than just copying notes from the board—as they felt this would make learning more enjoyable and encourage better attendance. This finding suggests that both curriculum flexibility and teaching approaches can play a key role in motivating pupils to come to school.

> *"[make] the lessons more fun. If I've got a good lesson, I'm going to want to go there. If I've got a bad day with boring teachers, I'm going to try to skip school."* [Pupil]

5.4 Taking a reward-based approach to attendance

All our case study schools had high attendance expectations, but the methods they used to enforce and encourage attendance varied.

Sanctions for poor attendance

All the schools we spoke to used some form of **sanction-based approach** for managing poor attendance. Common sanctions included:

- **Detentions** for lateness (either to school or individual lessons)
- **Letters and/or phone calls home** to inform parents or carers of attendance concerns
- **Fines**, though these were largely **restricted to term-time holidays**, as schools generally felt that fines were unhelpful in other circumstances—especially for families facing financial hardship, where **money itself was a key barrier to attendance**.

Use of rewards to encourage attendance

Schools differed **in the degree to which they complemented sanctions with rewards** for good attendance.

Sanctions-led approach

One group of schools primarily relied on sanctions, operating on the principle that high attendance was an expectation rather than something to be rewarded. While this approach reinforced the importance of regular attendance, some pupils in these schools felt that attendance policies focused more on consequences for poor attendance or behaviour than on recognition for positive engagement.

Reward-based approach

Other schools **combined both sanctions and incentives** to encourage good attendance. Pupils in these schools were highly aware of the rewards on offer for good attendance and found them motivating. This approach appeared to create a more balanced system, where attendance expectations were reinforced while also providing positive reinforcement for those who met them. Incentives varied between schools but included:

- **Prize draws**, with rewards such as bikes and iPads.
- **Trips** for pupils with high attendance.
- **Pizza parties** as a group incentive.
- **Stamps or badges**, which in some schools could be collected and exchanged for rewards at a **school shop** (e.g., chocolates, stationery, or iPads).
- **Prom attendance** (in Year 11), where attendance was a key criterion for being allowed to attend.

Perceived impact of reward-based vs sanctions-led approaches

Schools that combined rewards with sanctions generally reported seeing higher pupil engagement with attendance policies. Pupils in these schools appeared to be motivated to attend, as they saw a tangible benefit to doing so. In contrast, those in sanctions-led schools were more likely to perceive attendance policies as punitive and unfair, particularly if they felt their absences were due to circumstances beyond their control. The findings are consistent with emerging research which shows that a sense of belonging is important for pupils' learning and behaviour. Pupils who feel a sense of belonging in schools tend to be happier, more confident, and perform better academically. Additionally, there is evidence that a sense of belonging can improve pupil attendance (Riley,

Coates and Allen, 2020). Therefore, fostering a sense of belonging in schools may be a key strategy in enhancing both academic performance and attendance rates.

"We get praise stamps and postcards. They put stamps in your planner when you do something good. If you get a postcard, you get 20 stamps. Every term you can buy things with your stamps. You can get an iPad, footballs, highlighters, and chocolate oranges. Chocolate oranges are the most popular". [Pupil]

"Because if you come in and you know there's a chance that you might be in to win an iPad or a bike or shoes, then it might encourage you more." [Pupil]

However, both school staff and pupils acknowledged potential challenges with a reward-based approach to attendance, particularly if rewards were only given for 100% attendance. This could feel unfair to pupils who missed school for reasons beyond their control, such as illness or medical conditions, leaving them without the opportunity to earn a reward. Some pupils also noted that missing time early in a term or school year could reduce their motivation to attend later, as they knew they were no longer eligible for the reward. Recognising these issues, some schools had adapted their reward systems by offering incentives for improved attendance or considering attendance over shorter periods (e.g., weekly) to ensure more pupils had the chance to succeed and earn a reward.

"If you're off for a reason you can't control, and then you see people with good attendance going on a trip, it does make you feel bad sometimes." [Pupil]

"…we get the same children always getting 100%…If a student has had a day off, they know they've got no chance of getting that recognition, so that possibly doesn't give them an incentive then to come in and try again. By doing it weekly, it gives those children who struggle an opportunity to get some recognition for their improvement." [Attendance Lead]

6 Positive relationships and clear expectations encouraged pupils' return to school

School staff emphasised the importance of building strong, positive relationships with both pupils and their parents and carers both to support attendance and encourage returns after absence.

6.1 The importance of providing a designated point of contact

In addition to fostering a welcoming school environment (see Chapter 5), staff highlighted the value of providing **a designated point of contact for pupils** struggling with attendance. This was typically a member of the school's attendance team or a staff member who had already established a good rapport with the pupil.

This key staff member typically worked with the pupil over an extended period, offering consistent support to ease their transition back into school life. In schools that regularly conducted home visits, staff stressed the importance of ensuring that pupils were familiar with the attendance officers or pastoral staff, making home visits feel less intimidating and more supportive.

> *"We say to everyone in all our training, 'have a smile on your face'…I always say to a student, even if I don't know them that well, I always try and say, 'We really missed you yesterday'. I think that's key."*
>
> [Senior Leader]

Some schools also underscored **the importance of using positive language** when pupils returned after an absence. Rather than questioning where they had been or why they had missed school, **staff focused on warmly welcoming them back**, reinforcing a sense of belonging and reducing any potential feelings of shame or anxiety.

6.2 The role of parents and carers

School staff viewed parents and carers as either key facilitators or barriers to pupil attendance. When parents and carers supported the school's efforts, they played a crucial role in overcoming attendance challenges. Effective communication was seen as essential to securing this support and avoiding conflict. Schools used various methods to engage parents and carers, including texts, emails, phone and WhatsApp video calls, home visits, and offered multiple points of contact for parents and carers to get in touch with them.

Despite efforts to improve communication and build positive relationships, school staff reported that **some pupils lacked family support for improving attendance.** School staff tended to attribute this lack of support to parents and carers not valuing education or not recognising the importance of attending school every day, making it a particularly

> *"Family support is a massive thing. If parents aren't encouraging them, students won't overcome whatever it is that is stopping them from coming in."*
>
> [Attendance Lead]

challenging barrier for schools to address. Staff acknowledged that, in these instances, it was often the pupil who faced sanctions for poor attendance, even though the responsibility lay with parents and carers, particularly for younger pupils. As a result, some schools were exploring ways to shift accountability to parents and carers instead.

> *"The main problem areas for me are lack of engagement and lack of support from certain families and parents, that's a big issue if your parents are not on-board and if they don't value education, then they don't see the point in their child attending school every day. It's very hard to break that pattern particularly if you have sibling absence the same."*
>
> [Attendance Lead]

> *"I had to change that mindset that a child's responsible for their attendance; the parent is. So, we need to hold the parent accountable for their attendance. And I think that's been the biggest thing that has turned it around – re-establishing that parent-school relationship rather than it being: parents speak to child, school speaks to child, and we think the child can fix this."*
>
> [Senior Leader]

School staff also reported instances where **they felt parents and carers were over-protective, allowing their children to stay home too easily**—for example, for minor illnesses, mild headaches, or when the weather was cold. In other cases, they believed parents and carers were not enforcing attendance strictly enough. In these situations, staff felt a **firmer approach was necessary**. Strategies included requesting medical proof for prolonged absences, encouraging parents and carers to send children to school with mild illnesses, making early morning phone calls to ensure pupils got out of bed, and conducting home visits. In some isolated cases, attendance staff had assisted in getting pupils up and ready for school, emphasising the lengths that some schools are going to.

"And there's also the issue that for the demographic of students that we are looking at, parents are very protective. So, I had a parent yesterday. I asked her why her child wasn't in school last week and she said, "oh, because it was so cold on that day and I just knew it would be a problem with the buses, so I just told them to stay at home".

[Attendance Lead]

"'I used to have to go and drag boys out of their beds because their parents couldn't get them out. And I'd put them into the car and bring them into school. Back in the early days, we'd have to try everything to get them into school so that we could work with them. If you can't get them in, you can't do anything with them. We don't do any of that anymore [because attendance has improved as a result]*."*

[Attendance Lead]

6.3 The importance of setting expectations

In all cases, school staff reported that setting clear expectations for pupils and their parents and carers—and holding them accountable—was seen as crucial. **School staff emphasised the importance of communicating why attendance matters**, not just for academic performance but also for securing places in post-16 education. This message was particularly effective for motivating older pupils.

To enforce attendance expectations consistently, **schools relied on structured systems and processes to track pupil attendance and follow up on absences**. Many schools reported that they routinely issued fines for term-time holidays, which they believed had contributed to a reduction in such absences. However, staff acknowledged that implementing and maintaining these systems was resource-intensive, often requiring multiple staff members to manage these systems effectively. Despite this burden, they viewed detailed record-keeping as essential, particularly when escalation to statutory action was required. Without clear evidence of attempts to contact and support parents and carers, schools feared that parents could claim a lack of intervention and potentially avoid sanctions.

"One of the ways parents counteract these fines is that they say the school didn't put in such and such support. If the school didn't have the paperwork to back up these fines, they would fall down"

[Attendance Lead]

7 Schools struggled to access LA and CAMHS support, increasing pressure to provide these services in-house

The increase in pupil mental health concerns (reported in Chapter 1), meant that schools sometimes felt they needed support from specialist external services. This typically involved specialists coming into the school to provide targeted, one-to-one or small-group support. These professionals included school nurses, educational psychologists, and practitioners from CAMHS, as well as third-sector organisations offering counselling, mentoring, or wellbeing programmes tailored to young people. However, schools reported frequently facing significant challenges in accessing external services and, as a result, provided their own in-house support. This, however, created additional time and resource challenges.

7.1 Challenges accessing external support

School staff frequently reported being dissatisfied with the support they received from external agencies. Many reported approaching their LA for assistance in working with pupils with SEND, mental health difficulties, and persistent absenteeism. However, **they routinely found that the support they requested was not provided or was significantly delayed.** As a result, schools expressed frustration and a sense of being let down by their LAs, highlighting the challenges of securing timely and effective external support.

> *"We feel really let down by the local authority. They close cases way too quickly; they are highly disorganised…".* [Senior Leader]

Schools faced several key challenges when seeking external support. These included slow responses to issues raised, cases being closed too quickly, long waiting lists for support, and, in some cases, a complete lack of specialist provisions to help pupils with significant needs to reintegrate into school. Additionally, schools reported experiencing disorganisation, with cases often being referred back to them—frequently accompanied by support suggestions they had already attempted without success – further increasing the pressure on them. Schools also felt they lacked the necessary backing to enforce attendance-related sanctions, such as issuing fines for term-time holidays.

> *"It takes a lot of illness or a lot of absenteeism before it is seen as a serious matter...If I was to email the council and give them a synopsis of a student, they normally will come back and say, "do this, do that". And we're doing all of those things already, so there's a lot that's being pushed back onto the schools…"* [Attendance Lead]

Furthermore, schools noted challenges when parents and carers sought private diagnoses or therapy. In some instances, recommendations from private practitioners clashed with the

school's wider attendance strategies, making it difficult to implement a consistent and effective approach.

7.2 The development of in-house services

As a result of these challenges, schools reported having to provide their own in-house services, such as counselling and mental health support, school nurses, and family support teams. In some cases, they also paid private companies to deliver these services in an effort to prevent pupils' needs from escalating. However, funding these additional provisions placed significant strain on school budgets, reducing the resources available for other essential areas of school activity.

> *"In the local authority, there's not much support outside of this school, so we have to employ everyone here. If we want access to parental outreach work, there's nothing. If we know we've got children who are under persistent absence and we need to intervene, there is no specialist support…"* [Senior Leader]

While schools acknowledged that external agencies were also facing staffing shortages and financial constraints, there was a widespread perception that these agencies needed to *'step up'* and provide more effective support.

> *"'We spend £44,000 per year on four days' worth of practice* [alternative provision]. *And we have to do this because the local authority is so ineffective. £44,000 in a school - that could be spent in so many different ways, and we are spending it trying to reach out to those hardest-to-reach parents and pupils."* [Senior Leader]

7.3 The importance of multi-agency working

Although most of the schools in our sample reported negative experiences with external agencies for the reasons above, it is important to acknowledge that there were examples of schools having positive relationships with their LA and other local external agencies. Schools valued these external experts for their ability to provide bespoke interventions that went beyond what school staff could offer, particularly in cases involving complex mental health needs. In these instances, a **multi-agency approach** was reported to have been successfully implemented, **allowing relevant organisations to work together to address the underlying issues contributing to school absence**.

This collaborative approach not only provided more coordinated and effective support for pupils and their families but also eased the burden on schools. It also highlights a potential way forward for improving pupil attendance—ensuring that pupils, their families, and schools receive the support they need in a timely and effective manner.

> *"We have a good relationship with the local authority. I speak to them every day. We also have CAMHS, a school nurse and social workers. We'll do a multi-agency meeting around attendance when needed."* [Attendance Lead]

Conclusions and considerations

The final section of this report draws together the evidence that has been collected to address the study's underpinning research questions and offer a number of suggestions for policymakers and school leaders to consider.

1. **How do pupils feel when they are absent from school and to what extent do these feelings vary based on the reasons for their absence and their school's attendance policy?**

Our findings suggest that pupil absence elicits a range of emotions, shaped by both its causes and school policies. School staff and pupils generally felt that those returning from short illnesses reintegrate relatively easily, whereas pupils absent due to mental health struggles face greater challenges. Many pupils valued check-ins with trusted staff—such as Heads of Year, tutors, and pastoral staff—but some felt unsupported due to limited staff availability.

One of the most significant concerns and greatest causes of anxiety for absent pupils was catching up on missed schoolwork. Where schools provided structured support, such as online resources or teacher-prepared worksheets, this was felt to be helpful. However, inconsistent implementation of these policies left some pupils struggling, particularly when teachers were perceived to be unavailable or unwilling to assist. Pupils highlighted a need for personalised support to fully understand missed content but also recognised that school staff had limited capacity.

Despite schools offering various forms of support, some pupils felt neglected upon their return. They perceived that help was primarily directed at specific groups, such as those with special educational needs, while other pupils were expected to manage independently. This led to feelings of unfairness and disengagement.

Certain school policies were seen as adding stress to the return process. Pupils found repeated questioning about their absence intrusive, and in some cases distressing, particularly when done publicly. Furthermore, the constant reinforcement of attendance statistics, was found by some to be anxiety-inducing rather than motivating. Finally, including suspensions in attendance records was viewed as unfair by some pupils, as it could lead to a cycle of further negative feedback and sanctions.

In summary, our findings suggest that prioritising a welcoming, understanding approach—offering check-ins, structured support for missed lessons, and sensitive attendance monitoring— are more likely to foster positive reintegration experiences. Conversely, punitive and inconsistent policies may increase anxiety and disengagement. Whole-school supportive and empathetic approaches focused on creating a welcoming environment could help improve attendance and overall pupil well-being.

2. **What do schools currently do to help pupils return to school following absence, and how does this differ between schools?**

School staff recognised that pupil absences arise from a range of complex factors and used a variety of strategies to support reintegration. This 'toolbox' of support options includes pastoral support, one-to-one check-ins, support for missed lessons, home visits, and external referrals. The

choice and implementation of these strategies depend on individual pupil needs, school policies, and available resources.

School staff emphasised the importance of personalised support, ensuring that interventions address the root causes of absence. This typically involved one-to-one interactions with a designated staff member, allowing pupils to build trusting relationships and feel comfortable seeking help. Schools aimed to match pupils with appropriate staff members and provide a consistent point of contact to enhance their sense of security.

Decisions about support strategies were made collaboratively in attendance-focused meetings involving key staff such as Heads of Year, attendance teams, SENDCos, safeguarding leads, and senior leadership. This multi-disciplinary approach ensured that attendance interventions considered broader factors such as mental health, safeguarding concerns, and family circumstances.

The use of home visits and support for missed lessons varied by school. Schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas often prioritised early home visits for safeguarding reasons, whereas resource constraints limited their use in other schools. Approaches to support for missed lessons also differed—some schools provided no materials to discourage 'working from home', while others uploaded lessons or resources online with varying expectations.

School staff reported that a positive school environment helps reduce absence. Schools fostered this through supportive policies, a broad and balanced curriculum, extracurricular activities, pastoral care, and extended opening hours, helping pupils feel more engaged and connected.

Managing attendance placed a heavy workload on school staff, with tracking absences, following up with families, implementing interventions and documenting relevant information for potential LA penalty notices all requiring significant time and resources. In addition, while some schools used proactive strategies like home visits and early-morning calls, these were labour-intensive. This highlights that while schools are trying to offer individualised support to pupils to improve attendance, these efforts come with significant time and resource implications.

Overall, schools' approaches varied based on funding and local community needs. Greater consistency in implementation, a deeper understanding of individual pupil needs, and more funding could help ensure all pupils receive the support necessary for successful reintegration.

3. Are 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?

Staff perspectives

Home visits, attendance monitoring, and tailored support are resource intensive, requiring additional staff, straining school budgets, and adding to staff workload. School staff highlighted the significant time demands of these practices, often diverting attention from other responsibilities. They emphasised that increased investment was key for expanding support, particularly in schools with lower pupil premium funding. They identified several ways this additional funding could be used to boost attendance, including by employing more staff dedicated to their attendance efforts.

Long waiting lists and a lack of support from external agencies, including CAMHS and LAs, created additional pressures on school staff who were managing rising levels of pupil anxiety and other mental health needs. Schools felt they needed stronger and more consistent support from these agencies to better manage pupil needs, tackle the root causes of absence and improve attendance.

Some staff also emphasised the need for a more nuanced conversation with parents, carers, and pupils about the language used to describe everyday stresses and challenges, distinguishing these from significant mental health difficulties that require targeted support.

Pupil perspectives

Pupils appreciated one-to-one check-ins with school staff upon their return, but when questioned repeatedly or in public spaces, they requested more care and sensitivity.

Support for missed lessons was another key concern for pupils. Some schools provided online lesson materials, which pupils generally found helpful. However, there were examples of inconsistent implementation, with some pupils struggling without teacher explanations of the work or concepts. Other schools did not offer any form of support for missed lessons. Pupils in these schools expressed a desire for resources to be made available, along with one-to-one support, to prevent them falling behind. In addition, pupils emphasised the need for equitable support, as some felt it was only offered to specific groups, leaving others to manage on their own. They stressed that all students should have equal access to help, as personal struggles are not always visible.

Considerations for school leaders

1. **Foster a welcoming and inclusive school environment**: Create an environment that motivates pupils to attend and fosters a sense of belonging. This could include ensuring that attendance and behaviour policies prioritise encouragement and support over sanctions. Additionally, being thoughtful about the location and frequency of conversations with pupils about their absences may help foster a more supportive approach.
2. **Ensure consistency in support provision**: This could involve setting clear, school-wide expectations for staff, ensuring that all teachers consistently provide support for missed lessons, and offering training to help staff deliver appropriate pastoral support.
3. **Strengthen parent and carer engagement**: Working closely with pupils and their parents or carers to understand the barriers to attendance was felt to be one of the most effective ways of supporting pupils back to school. Schools may therefore find it helpful to develop a proactive communication strategy to build positive relationships with parents and carers and reinforce the importance of school engagement. This could include regular meetings, workshops, and home visits. Understanding the barriers to attendance and offering practical guidance on how parents and carers can support their child in attending more regularly may also be beneficial.
4. **Strengthen pastoral support and mental health provision**: Consider adopting the Government's eight principles for a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing (HM Government, 2015). This includes training staff to increase their knowledge of mental health

and wellbeing, integrating resilience-building strategies into the curriculum, and ensuring the timely and effective identification of pupils who would benefit from targeted support, along with appropriate referrals to support services.

5. **Provide support for missed lessons:** Providing lesson support to help pupils access missed work upon their return to school may make it easier for them to reintegrate. Schools could build on their recent experiences with remote learning (Walker et al., 2022) by offering lesson materials online, or by allowing pupils to collect resources from teachers. Teacher involvement and structured support sessions, such as homework clubs, one-to-one support, or small-group support, may be valuable in helping pupils reintegrate academically following an absence.

Considerations for policymakers

1. **Increase funding for attendance and pastoral support**: Providing targeted funding would help schools expand their attendance interventions and offer support to help pupils thrive. This could support initiatives such as home visits, the recruitment of additional pastoral staff (e.g., attendance officers, assistant heads of year), and tailored support for socio-economically disadvantaged pupils.
2. **Champion multiagency working coupled with investment in external mental health and family support services**: Specialist support services can play an important role in addressing the root causes of severe absence. Promoting multiagency collaboration to address complex cases, alongside increased funding for CAMHS and family support services, could help reduce waiting times and ensure timely access to support for pupils and their families—facilitating a smoother return to regular school attendance. The Government should also consider extending its programme of grants for schools to attend DfE quality assured training for senior mental health leads (DfE, 2025a).
3. **Consider the role of a diverse curriculum and extra-curricular activities in supporting school attendance:** There is evidence to suggest that integrating wellbeing content into the curriculum can positively affect student wellbeing (Lindorff, 2020). As highlighted by our case-study schools, offering activities that pupils can look forward to during the school day appears to be important in encouraging attendance. Interim findings from the Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review highlight the diversity of subjects taught at Key Stages 3 and 4, but also acknowledge that the current curriculum and assessment system does not fully support the progress and achievement of all young people (DfE, 2025b). The review panel may wish to explore how wellbeing content can be effectively integrated into a diverse curriculum, and how, when delivered alongside extracurricular activities, it can support attendance while maintaining high academic standards. This is particularly important for socioeconomically disadvantaged young people, who may face additional barriers to engagement and attendance.
4. **Enhance parent and carer engagement**: Parental and carer engagement plays a crucial role in improving attendance. It may be helpful to establish clearer policies and support mechanisms for working with parents and carers on attendance, while ensuring that schools have access to appropriate interventions and resources. Additionally, fostering collaborative approaches that engage parents and carers as partners—rather than relying on a sanction-

based approach—while consistently reinforcing the importance of daily school attendance could further strengthen engagement and support positive pupil outcomes.

5. **Build the evidence base for effective attendance strategies:** The evidence on effective approaches to improving attendance remains limited (EEF, 2022). There is a need for more empirical research to evaluate the impact of different school policies and interventions on attendance, academic outcomes, and pupil well-being. Building a stronger evidence base would help support schools and policymakers in identifying strategies that are the most effective for improving attendance and supporting pupils' return after absence.

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Appendix 1: Research questions underpinning the study

1. How do pupils feel when they are absent from school and to what extent do these feelings vary based on the reasons for their absence and their school's attendance policy?

2. What do schools currently do to help pupils return to school following absence, and how does this differ between schools?

3. Are 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?

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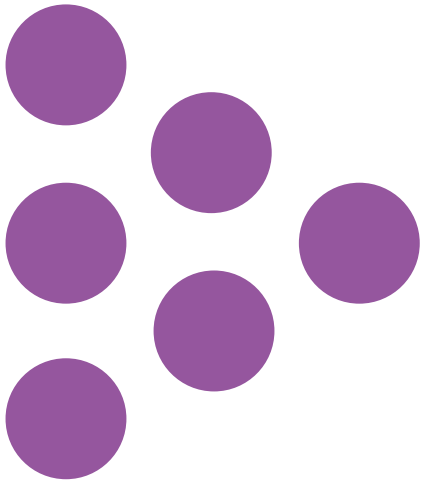
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