

Attendance

Inspection findings for the academic year 2024/25

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Introduction

Regular school attendance is one of the most important factors in a child's or young person's educational success. Attending school consistently helps children and young people develop academic knowledge, social skills and positive habits that contribute to their future achievements.

Recent research highlights that poor attendance is associated with:

- lower attainment
- reduced engagement in learning
- poorer wellbeing
- diminished future opportunities¹

Between September 2024 and June 2025, HM Inspectors (HMI) inspected 246 primary, secondary, special and all-through schools.

During every inspection, HMI evaluated how well schools are managing pupil attendance to identify the issues that impact on absence from school and what approaches schools are taking to address them. To do this, HMI engaged with staff and listened carefully to the views of children and young people, parents, partners and staff.

Main messages

Attendance has improved slightly but remains below pre-pandemic levels

Overall attendance in Scotland's schools increased to 91.0% in 2024/25 but remains below the 93.0% recorded in 2018/19. Authorised absence and persistent absence have both reduced, but levels of absence remain a significant concern.

¹ [Evidence, Impact and Actions for Consideration 2024-26 report | Improving attendance in Scotland | Resources | Education Scotland](#)

Low attendance remains strongly linked to disadvantage and additional support needs

Children and young people living in the most deprived areas and those with additional support needs continue to have lower attendance than their peers. Although some gaps have narrowed slightly, inequalities remain clear and require targeted action.

Most schools monitor attendance, but consistency and coding need to improve

Many schools have effective systems for analysing attendance data and identifying patterns. However, the use of attendance codes and thresholds varies too widely, and in some schools, data is not tracked or coded robustly enough to support accurate monitoring and timely intervention.

Effective improvement relies on relationships, shared responsibility and early support

Strong practice is characterised by senior leaders making attendance everyone's responsibility, setting clear expectations, and using nurturing relationships to strengthen pupils' sense of belonging. Early relational support, such as daily check-ins with trusted adults, can help address concerns before absence becomes more entrenched.

Targeted interventions are helpful, but their impact is variable and needs stronger evaluation

Schools use a range of approaches, including wellbeing support, family engagement, partner agency work, Pupil Equity Fund (PEF)-funded staffing and alternative learning environments. These approaches are improving attendance for some pupils, but overall impact is inconsistent. Schools need to measure more clearly which interventions are improving attendance and attainment.

Summary of findings

Attendance rates

Pupil attendance rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. In 2024/25, overall attendance in Scotland's schools was 91.0%. Although an increase on the previous year, it remained below the 2018/19 rate of 93.0%.

In 2024/25, the overall rate of authorised pupil absence across Scotland's schools was 5.3%. Despite recent improvement from a high of 6.1% in 2022/23, it remains above pre-pandemic levels of around 4.4%.

Sickness without education provision remains the main reason for authorised absence. This applies when pupils are unable to attend school because of illness or a medical condition. Although this rate has fallen since 2023/24, at 4.4% it remains higher than the pre-pandemic average of around 3.5%.

Unauthorised absence decreased only slightly, from 3.8% in 2023/24 to 3.7% in 2024/25. Unexplained absence, including truancy, remains the largest aspect of unauthorised absence, although this also reduced slightly.

By contrast, unauthorised holidays rose marginally, from 1.0% to 1.1%. This is the highest level recorded since 2009/10.

Persistent absence, defined as absence of 10% or more, decreased from 31.4% in 2023/24 to 28.5% in 2024/25.

Scottish Government data indicates that attendance is lower for children and young people with additional support needs than their peers. This attendance gap increased slightly in 2024/25. Attendance was 88.2% for those with an additional need compared to 92.9% for those without.

Lower attendance rates are also closely linked to levels of deprivation. In 2024/25, average attendance was 94.1% for children and young people living in the least deprived areas, compared with 87.6% for those living in the most deprived areas. The attendance gap between these groups narrowed slightly from 6.7 percentage points in 2023/24 to 6.5 percentage points in 2024/25.

Recording, monitoring and shared responsibility

Schools select one attendance code from a list of more than 50 to record each pupil's attendance status. Many schools have procedures for assigning these codes and quality-assuring their use. However, across Scotland, approaches to coding for approved educational activity vary widely, particularly in secondary schools. At times, attendance data is not coded appropriately. This limits staff's ability to monitor attendance accurately and is particularly evident in secondary schools.

Where practice is strong, senior leaders review attendance information regularly at whole-school, cohort, group and individual pupil levels. They use this analysis to identify patterns, respond to emerging issues and target action for individual pupils and across the whole school. In these schools, leaders also quality assure how attendance is recorded and coded.

In a few schools, attendance data is not tracked or monitored effectively. Some schools also lack clear policies that set out roles and responsibilities for those supporting attendance. Where this is the case, staff need clearer expectations for monitoring and tracking attendance, understanding and identifying the factors affecting absence and planning responses that reflect the school's context.

Many schools set their own attendance thresholds and agree responses when a pupil's attendance falls below these expectations. However, there is wide variation in how schools set and apply these thresholds, which leads to inconsistency across Scotland. Regular monitoring of individual patterns of attendance and absence should be a minimum expectation for all schools and should help staff, pupils, parents and carers identify support needs and understand the reasons for concern.

In the strongest schools, senior leaders make clear that attendance is everyone's responsibility. They ensure that all staff understand their role in promoting and supporting good attendance. Ambitious attendance targets are communicated clearly and understood across the school.

Senior leaders and staff understand that good attendance does not happen in isolation. It is closely linked to the quality of the curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment, as well as to inclusion and the wider ethos of the school. In the strongest examples, staff use nurturing approaches and positive relationships to motivate children and young people and strengthen their sense of belonging. They work with pupils to create welcoming and calm

environments and support them to develop approaches to emotional regulation and wellbeing. This helps build positive relationships and improve engagement in school.

In a few schools, staff do not yet have a sufficiently detailed understanding of the issues affecting some pupils, such as caring responsibilities. As a result, support is not always tailored well enough to pupils' needs and circumstances.

Support to improve attendance

Overall, schools are promoting positive attendance across the whole school community. Staff reinforce clear and consistent messages about attendance through assemblies, the wellbeing curriculum and classroom discussions. In the strongest practice, children and young people are meaningfully involved in school improvement, helping staff understand and respond to issues that affect their experience of school. This supports pupils to feel included, listened to and connected to their school community, strengthening their motivation, engagement and sense of belonging.

Staff respond quickly when attendance for individual pupils begins to decline. They use their knowledge of the pupil, often through one-to-one conversations, to understand what support may be needed. These conversations help staff explore pupils' wellbeing and identify factors that may be affecting their attendance. The most effective support includes regular, and often daily, check-ins with trusted adults. This helps staff monitor attendance, strengthen relationships and respond to issues as they emerge. This kind of low-level, relational intervention can improve attendance quickly, reduce perceived barriers and help prevent further absence.

In the strongest practice, staff use a range of wellbeing tools to assess the needs of children and young people. They analyse this information to identify emerging themes, adapt curriculum and learning experiences, and put relevant interventions in place for individuals and groups.

Working with families

Schools use a range of approaches to communicate with parents and carers about the importance of attendance and its impact on pupils' achievement. They reinforce clear and regular messages through newsletters, displays, infographics and other communication channels. In the strongest practice, senior leaders set consistently high expectations for every pupil's attendance

and communicate these clearly to parents, carers and learners. This is most effective when schools build positive and trusting relationships with families, supporting a shared understanding of the importance of attendance and the impact of absence. Increasingly, staff promote positive attendance through approaches such as house competitions, certificates and prizes. Staff should continue to ensure that these approaches are inclusive and reflect the guidance in [Included, Engaged and Involved part 1](#).

In many schools, senior leaders and staff work effectively with families to support attendance. They identify declining attendance quickly and engage sensitively with children, young people and their families. Staff listen carefully to parents and carers to understand the barriers to regular attendance. They provide support where needed and challenge families appropriately when attendance does not improve. Schools and families work together to address the reasons for absence and agree clear plans to improve attendance for individual children and young people. This includes responding to practical challenges affecting family life, such as work commitments or financial pressures. Many schools provide breakfast clubs and use a range of approaches to identify and reduce financial barriers.

Where policies, roles and responsibilities are unclear, schools do not always work consistently with families. In these circumstances, staff should involve children, young people, parents and carers in reviewing and developing approaches to attendance. This should include planning support for individual pupils as well as agreeing whole-school approaches.

Working with partners

There are strong examples of staff collaboration with external partners and agencies to support improvements in children and young people's attendance. Staff and partners plan interventions that increase engagement and motivation. Effective partnership working includes carefully planned support for identified pupils, such as alternative learning spaces, outdoor learning, careers education and physical or skills-based activities. School staff and partners work well together when they identify the factors affecting attendance and measure improvement for individuals and groups using clear outcome measures.

However, the extent and impact of multi-agency working remain too variable across Scotland. The support that schools receive often depends on how well

they understand available services and on the capacity of agencies to engage. Schools and partner agencies should work together to reduce this variability by improving awareness of available services, strengthening communication and referral processes, and making best use of available resources to meet the needs of schools and learners consistently.

Part-time timetables

An increasing number of children and young people attend school on a part-time timetable for part of their school experience. Most of these arrangements are managed well and reviewed within appropriate timescales. When used appropriately, part-time timetables can help reduce anxiety about attending school. They can also support children and young people to re-engage with learning and gradually increase the time they spend in school.

However, not all schools use part-time timetables in line with national guidance.² Too many pupils are not receiving their full entitlement to education and spend too long on reduced timetables. In a few schools, this is giving rise to safeguarding concerns. Schools should monitor and review part-time timetables regularly and robustly as part of planning around the child. These arrangements should be used for the shortest time possible, and staff must ensure that every child and young person receives their full education entitlement.

There are strong examples of targeted wellbeing support helping children and young people feel more included and attend more regularly. Effective approaches include soft starts, daily check-ins with trusted adults, activities that reduce the cost of the school day, breakfast clubs, and nurture or wellbeing spaces. These approaches help some pupils regulate, feel calm, maintain attendance and be ready to learn.

In many cases, schools use Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) effectively to strengthen staffing and resources aimed at improving attendance. Examples include attendance-focused support assistants and welfare staff, walking buses, outdoor learning interventions and nurture provision. Staff employed to support attendance work effectively with individual children and young people, identified groups and families. They provide practical, targeted support.

² [Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1: Improving Attendance in Scotland's Schools](#)

In some secondary schools, alternative learning environments help young people remain in school or re-engage with learning. Targeted interventions often focus on literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing. These approaches aim to re-engage pupils in a supportive setting, address identified gaps and improve attainment and achievement.

Although targeted support is improving attendance and attainment for some individual children and young people, overall attendance is not improving in a number of schools. Staff should continue to measure the impact of their approaches more consistently so they understand which interventions are improving attendance and supporting attainment across the school.