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ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners



Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education  
Department for the Economy  
and other commissioning Departments



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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 The importance of attendance and attainment**

*If you don't attend, you can't attain* is a slogan adopted by more than one school to promote their policy and practice in raising standards through improved attendance. In the Department of Education's (DE) regional strategy for improving attendance at school, *Miss School = Miss Out*<sup>1</sup>, the data reported on the relationship between attendance and attainment makes the case clear.

While the correlation is evident, causation is more complex.

The findings of this Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) survey of attendance in schools confirm that there is no one tip which offers a 'quick fix' for poor attendance. The reality, in those schools that are successful in improving attendance and raising standards, is that an holistic approach, with determined leadership which creates a positive culture for success and acts on all of the pieces of the attendance jigsaw, is necessary for an effective solution.

Leadership, vision, ethos, culture, pastoral care, a relevant and adaptive curriculum, careful consideration of the needs, interests and ability of all of the learners, teaching which engenders engaged learning for all learners, prompt responses to upward trends in absence data, close engagement with parents, external agencies and others; all of these pieces make up the jigsaw.

Underpinning the findings is the need for teachers and leaders to have a research-informed understanding of the personal, social and emotional reasons why and how learners learn and, more importantly, why and how they may fail. The development of this understanding is necessary right from initial teacher education and must be reinforced through continuing professional learning and development. And, no matter how well-informed or holistic, nothing works well forever, so evaluating the impact of each action and making adjustments matters to a school's continued success.

### **1.2 The remit of the survey**

Following from a Public Accounts Committee report on improving pupil attendance<sup>2</sup>, the ETI was commissioned by the DE to undertake a good practice survey into how schools are improving attendance.

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. identify effective strategies to improve pupil attendance in primary, post-primary and special schools;
- ii. record case study examples of the most effective practice; and
- iii. draw together and share these examples of good practice with schools.

The methodology is summarised in the appendix. The ETI thanks all the schools that willingly contributed their experience and insight to this work.

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<sup>1</sup> Miss School = Miss Out. Regional Strategy for Improving Attendance at School. Department of Education. 2016

<sup>2</sup> Public Accounts Committee Report on Improving Pupil Attendance. 14 May 2014

The overall findings of the survey in identifying effective strategies to improve pupil attendance (objective i) are included in this report, which comprises **Part One**. The case study examples (objectives ii and iii) are drawn together in **Part Two**<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.3 The changing context for schools in Northern Ireland

The survey was conducted in a school system which is changing. The children attending Northern Ireland schools come from an increasingly diverse range of heterogeneous communities and cultures. In one of the schools in this survey, 28 languages are spoken by the children. Seventeen percent of that school's population are Roma and just over 60% of the children are entitled to free school meals. In such schools, promoting attendance is an important feature of their work: for example in 2009, Botanic Primary School had the second lowest attendance figure in Belfast with an attendance of 84.5%. The number of children who are newcomers, or had been newcomers, is almost half the school's population which in turn has a significant impact on the attendance figures before it improved. This changing context needs to be taken into account when measuring the success of schools in promoting attendance. The changing, more complex profile of learners in our schools is a growing challenge for school leaders, staff, and other agencies.

The good practice report and the case studies are timely to support the DE's renewed strategy for improving attendance at school and the integration of Children's Services into the Department of Education in 2016.

## 2. What works – a summary

Through the survey we identified **four central elements** which evidentially lead to improved attendance and higher standards in schools. Furthermore, we identify **three effective actions** which need to be taken when low attendance is evident.

Although it is impossible to make a *causal* link between the strategies outlined here, and improvements in academic attainment, the evidence is that a relentless focus on promoting attendance can help to break the cycle of deprivation and raise standards.

### 2.1 The four central elements

- i. **Leadership**: means taking responsibility for prioritising good attendance and building a culture which connects attendance and attainment in the minds of staff, pupils and parents. A key characteristic is a defined role for a senior member of staff, sometimes a specific post of responsibility, to take the lead and link with the local community, with parents, local social agencies and businesses. In successful case studies, the governors take an active part in constructing the school attendance policy and strategies, holding those who take the lead to account and monitoring the impact.
- ii. **Close educational engagement with parents**: seeks to raise awareness of the intrinsic link between attendance and attainment, and especially the importance of building habits of good attendance from the earliest years: both in early years settings and in primary schooling. Inspection work by ETI in early years settings affirms the importance of pre-school and nursery providers placing an emphasis on establishing good habits of attendance from the outset.

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<sup>3</sup> PDF copies of both parts of the report and of the case studies may be found on [www.etini.gov.uk](http://www.etini.gov.uk). Part Two is also set out on the ETI website to enable each case study to be accessed individually.

- iii. **Tailored education programmes:** refers to the need to ensure that young people experience the curriculum and teaching as relevant to their needs, interests and learning styles as well as addressing the barriers which they may experience as individuals. Mentoring young people is cited by successful schools as a key driver in raising attendance and attainment by reminding them of the intrinsic value of learning.
- iv. **Strategic monitoring, reporting and evaluating:** refers to a clear strategy for closely monitoring relevant data and evaluating and reporting on the effectiveness of actions taken to promote improvement. In these case studies, evidence is collected systematically; data on attendance is recorded accurately and is linked to progress and attainment. For example, in terms of qualitative data the measurement of the impact of mentoring with the most vulnerable learners is a key feature of the most effective practice.

## 2.2 The three effective actions

When closely-monitored attendance data indicates poor or falling attendance, for individuals or for groups, three effective actions need to be taken:

- i. **Prompt and direct contact with individual parents:** in the effective case studies, schools take action on the first day of absence and do not wait until absence drops to formal trigger points. The personal contact with parents works best because it establishes that the school knows the learner as an individual and can guide the family or carer to appropriate support, if necessary.
- ii. **Early intervention of external support:** early engagement with external services initiates early intervention and provides bespoke support as soon as poor attendance shows signs of becoming an established pattern.
- iii. **Rewarding attendance and sanctions:** rewarding good attendance, both explicitly with the use of extrinsic rewards (prizes, recognition and so on) alongside highlighting the intrinsic motivation of success, is used along with being equally clear with parents and carers about the sanctions available for absence.

Sections 3. to 8. which follow summarise in more detail, with analysis of findings from the questionnaire illustrated by extracts from the school case studies, the four central elements of the jigsaw and the three effective actions which may be taken. Quotations boxed in italics are taken from the case studies and the responses to the online questionnaire.

### 3. Leadership: taking responsibility, creating a culture, taking a lead

3.1 The findings of the study highlight the importance of a senior leader taking lead responsibility for improvement in attendance and prioritising an attendance strategy in the school development policy and action plans. School leaders develop a culture for good attendance, which is characterised by an acute awareness of the importance of attendance and its link to attainment: *If you don't attend, you can't attain.*

Typically, an action plan sits within the school development plan, with attendance targets, and progress reported routinely to the board of governors. The school's attendance plan is complemented by staff development and, through a personal review and staff development (PRSD) plan objective for all staff, is linked explicitly to its positive behaviour policies. The roles and responsibilities of the classroom or form teachers, the principal and governors are clarified and the pupil/student council is also engaged in discussing strategies and solutions.

*The leadership and management of the school recognised the importance of improving the attendance rate to bring it in line with or above the Northern Ireland average. In addition, there was emerging evidence through the analysis of children's standardised test scores that low attendance was impacting adversely on the development of children's numeracy skills. In 2013, the principal's curriculum objective linked to performance review and staff development was to: monitor monthly attendance and work with the newly appointed Education Welfare Officer to identify and address latecomers and poor attendance.*

3.2 Overall, four-fifths (82.5%) of schools that responded to the online questionnaire have an attendance policy. It is a concern that one in six (17.5%) reported that they do not have one (or said they do not know if they do). The absence of a policy and plan is more notable in primary schools. While the aim of improving and sustaining high levels of attendance is a priority in four-fifths (79%) of school development plans in both phases, it is lower, in two-thirds (67%), of primary schools. When it comes to action plans only one in five (22%) of primary schools, compared with four out of five (78%) of post-primary schools, have a related action plan. The pattern reported here is concerning when the experience of schools which deal successfully with attendance is the belief that patterns of poor attendance need to be tackled promptly.

3.3 Almost all (96%) of primary principals responding to the questionnaire take the lead, with two-thirds (67%) of primary teachers being named as responsible. In post-primary schools, responsibility is taken, usually jointly, by a vice-principal and/or by the year heads and by four out of five (79%) of form teachers. The case studies indicate the importance of **one person** taking the lead, but ensuring the commitment of all of the teachers to create a pervasive culture for good attendance across the school. In a small number of schools the prime responsibility is taken outside the educational staff of the school by office staff, elsewhere the school does not name anyone within the school, with the Education Welfare Officer and the parents usually identified.

In a minority of schools, responses indicate that the school has appointed a person to work directly with families, with various job titles: parent/family engagement/liaison/support coordinator/worker.

*We appointed a senior executive officer from the school's clerical staff, to monitor attendance on a weekly basis and to liaise with the principal, educational welfare officer and staff. A much greater impact, we believe, has been the response of parents to the focus on attendance. Initially parents were quite blasé about phoning the school when their child was absent, providing notes to explain absence, keeping their child off school for frivolous reasons and taking term time holidays. However, except for the latter, this has now improved significantly. The main reason for this has been our sustained focus on attendance and appointing a very capable and committed person to monitor it.*

3.4 The best strategies are underpinned by a research-informed understanding of engagement in learning as the quotation below illustrates.

*All pupils from the ages of 9 to 18 are given the knowledge and understanding of the five pillars of sustained well-being and happiness as espoused by the positive psychologist Dr Martin Seligman and his PERMA (positivity, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) model<sup>4</sup>. PERMA is displayed in every classroom and an explicit link is made between each of its components and the curriculum and particularly the significant transformative elements of the school co-curriculum. It is as equally important that the staff of the school live and teach these principles.*

3.5 The questionnaire data indicates that only half of all schools report regularly to governors on the school's attendance rates and in fewer cases the governors take an active role. Successful examples include where governors participate in constructing the school policy and strategies, in monitoring the impact of the work and holding to account those who take the lead in managing attendance in school.

However, given that a common theme in responses from school was that successful strategies can lose their impact over time and need to be monitored, evaluated, reviewed and adjusted on a regular basis it would be important that a regular overview of the effectiveness of practice is maintained by senior leaders and governors. This can be especially so when a school may be trying a diverse range of approaches but not in a strategically interlinked and coherent way.

#### **4. Close educational engagement with parents**

4.1 The second central element is the importance of educating parents constructively about the correlation between attendance and academic attainment, ahead of communicating the sanctions that may be imposed for absence. Schools make effective use of the DE publication *School Attendance Matters – a Parent's Guide*<sup>5</sup> which also outlines the legal requirement and also offers practical tips to help parents.

4.2 Schools communicate information about attendance to parents in many different formats, including: induction meetings; parent information evenings; parental workshops and the distribution of the school attendance policy and publications from the DE's school attendance campaign. All of these demonstrate explicitly the link between attendance and attainment and emphasise the importance of building community belief in the intrinsic value of education.

4.3 Attendance workshops both for parents and for pupils, using student welfare officers and active learning methods, such as quizzes, raise awareness of the importance of attendance; promote positive learning behaviours and outline clearly the consequences of absence.

Parental awareness is raised by equating absence percentages to number of teaching days (as some parents have difficulty interpreting the meaning of percentage attendance rate) and by reporting regularly on attendance at the key assessment/tracking points.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/science-of-happiness>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-attendance-matters-parents-guide>

*Detailed and frank information shared with parents through: induction materials and evenings for years 8, 11 and 13; explicit information about a pupil's attendance shared with parents through the four data reports per year; parent-teacher meetings; and the school's early warning texting service. This information will make clear to parents that 95% attendance is only satisfactory because it represents nine days' absence per year, or that 90% attendance represents practically four weeks' absence per year. In these materials, the school has noted openly the DE findings that 17 days' absence equates to dropping one grade. The school feels that sharing the number of days missed is much more powerful than sharing a percentage. 'It's crucial to dispel the myth that 90% attendance is acceptable'.*

*The school's attendance policy was reviewed and all parents were briefed on the attendance policy at curriculum meetings in September 2013. In addition, the school produced a leaflet for parents, based on the DE's School Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide, which outlined clearly the percentage of attendance equated to the number of days missed. Crucially, this leaflet also highlighted the impact that this would have on the children's learning. School half day absences dropped immediately in 2015 from 400 to 70 as a result.*

## **5. Tailored education programmes**

5.1 Schools which have focused on the relationship between the curriculum and teaching on attendance have found that: creating a positive, happy, engaging learning ethos for learners; nurturing the learner; providing a good education in the classroom; tailoring better the curriculum to the needs of the pupils; including guest speakers from business and industry in the school's careers education information and guidance (CEIAG) programme; building the pupils own awareness of the importance of attendance and the negative impact of their absence, are all strategies which make for a more engaging curriculum and a climate for eager learning.

*A stronger emphasis is placed on differentiated learning to ensure that learning activities are better matched to the ability of the learners who are succeeding in school and want to attend. The high levels of activities make learning interesting, such as educational visits to engage children, to give them more experience of self-improvement and so that children do not want to miss out on school.*

5.2 The schools reported that ensuring, through teaching approaches, both in form classes and through a monthly focus on attendance at school assemblies, that pupils are familiar with the importance of good attendance and the link to attainment.

5.3 Input to CEIAG teaching by guest speakers from local employers and businesses and particularly, in one case, the Tesco Community Champion, stressing the importance of the habits of punctuality and attendance and reinforcing these messages through the CEIAG personal statement, makes the curriculum and their attendance more relevant to young people.



5.4 Two-thirds of schools engage pupils in one-to-one discussions (94% in post-primary and special schools and 52% in primary schools) about low attendance rates. Forty-three percent, in addition, use group work in, for example, circle time or in form lessons. School assemblies focused on attendance are the third most common method employed.

5.5 The pastoral curriculum and personal development lessons contribute to improving/sustaining attendance. Stimulating lessons lead to a culture of not wanting 'to miss out' on positive learning experiences. There is a link meeting the children's emotional and social needs and their willingness to come to school. The principles of nurturing mean that school is a safe, welcoming environment, underpinned by good relationships between staff and pupils and staff and parents.

5.6 Some schools report that they have identified a connection between the provision of quality personal development and mutual understanding (PDMU) teaching, coupled with regular reminders to pupils during registration classes and the development of the pupils' resilience, their higher levels of attendance and their achievement.

*Personal development (PD) classes are timetabled for the whole school during period one on a Tuesday. During the first PD lesson of every month all form teachers focus on improving attendance. Individual form class attendance statistics are discussed and displayed on class notice board. This creates a competitive aspect to attendance and fosters peer pressure to maintain good attendance in order to not let your form class down. Attendance is also addressed and celebrated at assemblies, whole school and year teams using school information and management systems data.*

5.7 A range of further effective engagement strategies reported include: breakfast, homework and Extended School clubs; senior staff welcoming pupils each morning at the school entrances; picking up quickly on late arrivals to school before they develop into poor attenders; the development of personal education plans for poor attenders; the Primary Attendance Matters programme; staff development which maintains a high level of awareness of the role of every teacher; reporting attendance regularly to the governors; the role of a family/home link officer; links with other agencies; and also the impact of the local press reporting fines imposed by the Courts for persistent absence.

## **6. Strategic monitoring, reporting and evaluating**

6.1 Almost all schools (except 2% responding to the online questionnaire) use SIMS<sup>6</sup> data to raise the awareness of class teachers about the financial opportunity cost as it relates to poor attendance, low attainment and social disadvantage.

The distribution of analysed data on a regular basis to teachers emphasises the responsibility of the class and the form teachers and supports regular audits of attendance which are monitored at all levels by: class teachers, head of year groups, the senior leaders.

6.2 Overseeing attendance is an important part of the form teacher's role: form teachers are diligent in following up the absence reasons and signatures supplied by parents (in a standard form in the school diary) and homework diaries are audited by year tutors to quality assure content in the pupils' diaries and parental engagement in signing them.

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<sup>6</sup> School information and management system (SIMS)

*Up until 2012/13 registers had been taken manually, then following SIMS training during the August training days in 2013/14 the college moved to SIMS am/pm registers; this was followed up by the full use of lesson monitor. These types of initiatives helped both staff and students to be aware of their attendance and punctuality at school. It aided greatly monitoring attendance and punctuality across the college (e.g.) 2012 **91%** attendance; in 2014 the attendance rose to **95%**. In post 16, students and parents are very much more aware of the importance of good attendance and the introduction of lesson monitor has raised the awareness of where students are and that they are aware that in each lesson there is a roll being taken.*

6.3 SIMS monitoring reports enable trigger points to be set to make gaps in attendance visible and lateness recording is also used to trigger follow-up action before lateness extends into absence. Records of absence can be carried over into the assessment target tracker for each pupil, providing important pastoral context to help leaders understand, and address, variations in assessment data.

*The school started to target absent year 12 pupils in their attendance strategy: previously they were not included because official court action took too long and for that reason it was believed that it would not benefit attendance figures. Now the school recognises that better attendance in year 12 raises attainment, and therefore the school standards.*

6.4 Those schools explicitly linking attendance and attainment through strategic monitoring, reporting and evaluating are able to bring, in a systematic way, the four central elements (with leadership action, close engagement with parents and individually tailored curriculum) together. Schools reported that initiatives to raise attainment by improving attendance have resulted in significantly improved learning outcomes. For example, by giving pupils regular feedback on their monthly attendance percentages, they were encouraged to take responsibility for improvement in their own learning.

*Increased self-belief and motivation is demonstrated by a majority of our pupils. The reward initiative has afforded the opportunity for the pupils to take responsibility for their own learning. Pupils have a greater understanding of the relationship between a day's attendance and their overall monthly attendance. Those pupils, who were identified as being on track to being 'a persistent absentee', took part in 'motivational mentoring' and received additional support. From the induction programmes, parents have been made aware of their responsibilities and the potential consequences of a poor attendance record. This has improved a collaborative working relationship.*

*Standardised scores showed an improvement in attainment and these were discussed with the pupil. An individual education plan is devised at stage 1 to continue to monitor the situation. The pupil will access a transition programme in the summer term and all relevant information is passed on. Attendance certificates will be presented at the leaver's assembly. Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are dealt with early so as not to impact negatively upon attendance and thus make the situation worse for the learner.*

6.5 The schools reported that a more in-depth and detailed analysis of related SIMS data shows up discrepancies in performance.

*Although our overall attendance was 95% in 2012/13, an analysis of our underachieving pupils showed that a number of them had quite poor attendance. Therefore, it was agreed that improving attendance would become a priority area in our school development plan with its own budget allocation.*

*As a result, our overall attendance has improved steadily from 2010/11. In 2014/15 our attendance equalled the NI average for all schools of 93.5% and is above the average for non-grammar schools (92%). (There is) a significant improvement in GCSE outcomes:*

*In 2010/11 56.9% of pupils achieved 5+GCSEs Grades A\*-C.*

*In 2014/15 98% of pupils achieved 5+GCSEs Grades A\*-C.*

*In 2010/11 27.6% of pupils achieved 5+GCSEs Grades A\*-C including GCSE English and mathematics.*

*In 2014/15 74% of pupils achieved 5+GCSEs Grades A\*-C including GCSE English and mathematics.*

6.6 Record keeping enables all stakeholders to be kept informed. In some schools, staff have received training on SIMS Discover (which is a relatively new analytical and reporting service in C2k) to keep up to date with technological developments, to celebrate attendance and acknowledge and the work with the Education Welfare Officer to introduce the new Primary Attendance Matters (PAM) resources and workshops into the school in the near future.

*An attendance policy has been in place since September 2013 and all stakeholders are reminded annually of its pertinence. Attendance is a priority in the school development plan and is embedded in the school's pastoral system. Our approach to improving attendance is reflective and dynamic, with pupils, families, staff and outside agencies working together. Attendance is not viewed simply as a statistic, but as a key aspect of our pastoral provision as well as the outworking of policies within our school which are child centred and effective. Curricular adjustments for year 11 pupils as well as analysis of pupil attitudes have impacted positively on attendance rates across the school. There are a range of reward systems for good attendance in place.*

*Attendance is monitored by a senior teacher at Key Stage 3 and by a vice principal at key stages 4 and 5. Attendance management is included in the pastoral care action plan and is addressed at all head of year and head of year/form teacher meetings.*

*Refinement / adjustment of the strategies: initially it was an am/pm recording of attendance. We decided to facilitate a more accurate recording of attendance, we introduced lesson monitor. This also enabled us to monitor punctuality, visits to the toilet, etc. As we have progressed in the use of the SIMS lesson monitor, we have also refined our attendance policy in line with lesson monitor and procedure for attendance.*

6.7 However, in the sheer busyness of the school day, good strategies can fail to be implemented consistently by all on a daily basis. This risk also requires constant vigilance by senior responsible staff: SIMS codes not recorded accurately; parental absence notes not chased up; afternoon absences not picked up.

*During the last three years, three members of staff completed their Professional Qualification in Headship. During the course, it became apparent that (our school) was not recording unauthorised holidays correctly. Training for the school secretary and the principal, coupled with an annual update for all staff on the correct codes to apply for registering attendance, including the correct application of codes for unauthorised holidays, has ensured that there is a consistent, robust approach to recording children's absence.*

6.8 Several schools report issues concerning the disproportionate impact of some circumstances: the impact of a small number of long-term illnesses on headline data; the impact of a small proportion of families ignoring advice on the timing of vacations; the proportion of newcomer families and other family groups (such as, for example, those in the armed services) who have important, legitimate reasons to be absent during term time, for example, to take a holiday when the services member is not on posted duty overseas, or to return to their homeland for cultural, religious and family reasons.

Counter-intuitively, some schools report that they have to advise a few parents not to bring an ill child to school to record their full attendance when the risk of infecting many others in the school is high.

## **7. Effective actions: prompt and *direct* contact with individual parents**

7.1 Traditionally, when attendance falls below 85% for an individual formal action is triggered<sup>7</sup>. However, successful schools do not wait this long and act much more quickly, regardless of which year group the pupil is in.

7.2 Schools use a wide range of mechanisms to contact parents about attendance issues. These include text-messages; escalating letters of concern when trigger-points are reached; telephone calls; one-to-one meetings and a requirement for signed absence notes that is enforced rigorously.

However, a very wide disparity in what is regarded as a trigger point is clear from the evidence. The most common contact with parents when trigger points are reached is through letters of concern, many of which are only sent when the 85% attendance threshold is reached. A few schools report setting 95% (the loss of a week each school year) as their higher trigger point. Rapidly escalating text messages and letters are sent to parents when attendance reaches trigger points.

7.3 A significant proportion of schools report that, in their experience, phone calls or text messaging at a much higher threshold, even after one day, is much more effective. Communication with parents is best done on a personal basis, the response is much better than when schools send out letters about absenteeism.

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<sup>7</sup> See paragraph 8.4

7.4 Nine out of ten of all schools indicate that they make use of one-to-one meetings to promote better attendance. Furthermore, while 45% of all schools address attendance in whole-school parent meetings, this is only the case in one-third of primary and special schools compared with over two-thirds of post-primary schools. Two per cent of all schools reported no engagement at all with parents about attendance.

7.5 Effective use is made of homework diaries for home/school communication. Some schools have a section in the diary for parents to complete if the child has missed school. Monthly auditing of attendance and communicating this to parents in homework diaries has increased awareness of 'good' attendance. An increasing number of parents contact the school in response to reminder stickers placed in the homework diaries. Early intervention is the key in overcoming barriers to good attendance especially as patterns of poor attendance can now be identified quickly through the close tracking of data.

7.6 In cases where the principal makes contact with parents about attendance issues, the tone of the correspondence must be supportive if it is to be successful. Where some families may have an innate distrust of authority school leaders should act supportively in their roles.

## **8. Effective actions: early intervention of external support**

8.1 The Education Welfare Officer (EWO) works with at risk families and schools report, in addition to the Education Welfare Service (EWS), that they engage with (in order of significance), the Looked After Children Service, the Health and Social Care Trusts, the Inclusion and Diversity Service, the Traveller Education Support Service and agencies in the voluntary sector, such as Bernardo's, the YMCA and various counselling groups.

8.2 The frequency of reported school meetings with the EWO to discuss specific cases ranges from weekly to monthly; the ability which the EWO brings is to secure bespoke family support promptly. Closer weekly liaison with the EWO results in a fast-track provision of social and other services appropriate to meet the needs of individual family cases.

8.3 In one case, a school chaplain is continuing to develop an outreach programme to support pupils who are finding it difficult to come to school and a personalised learning programme is developed in appropriate circumstances. Effective links with a range of external agencies has meant the school has been able to sign-post the most relevant support to pupils and parents.

*In response to need, a community health and well-being forum has been established which is led by (our school). In addition, administrative adjustments have been made for SIMS and the PASS<sup>8</sup> survey data is being aligned to attendance.*

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<sup>8</sup> PASS: Pupil Attitude to Self and School, an evaluation tool.

8.4 When a pupil's attendance falls below 85% and when barriers to good attendance have been identified, schools seek support and work effectively with a range of agencies which include: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, the Autism Advisory and Intervention Service Extern<sup>9</sup>, Women's Aid, the local Health and Social Care Gateway team, the local Family Support Hub, or the Family Works School Counselling Service<sup>10</sup> to support the pupil and their family in any way possible. Most schools are very positive about the responsiveness of EWO and external agencies. Seventy-eight percent report that the external links with agencies are successful or very successful in helping them to promote better attendance.

## **9. Effective actions: rewarding attendance and sanctions**

9.1 Extrinsic rewards are used by many schools to promote attendance in a variety of ways. Monthly certificates, badges, trophies, house points, form class attendances shields are not always valued, so schools have become more creative in engaging pupils through celebration assemblies, form competitions, newsletters and, best 'attender' photographs and attendance figures displayed about the school, trips to local activity centres, prizes and treats. Attendance can be linked to behaviour management structures and to house systems.

9.2 A few schools in the survey comment on *'a real lack of "teeth" in the current system*. They report that, despite referrals, the families which need help frequently fail to engage with the services provided. Schools are rightly reluctant to pursue legal routes as the process is protracted and it can alienate parents, leading to further disengagement. However, a few are of the view that a firm approach by local magistrates which attracts local media coverage can have a positive effect: in one instance cited, the pupil's attendance improved and he progressed to a local grammar school, becoming a top examination performer. On balance, it is more preferable for a school to persist with the strategies outlined in this report.

## **10. What would make a difference?**

10.1 When schools were asked in the online questionnaire what they believed would make a difference to their efforts to improve attendance, those who responded identified strategies which other schools in the survey reported that they are already using successfully. This response indicates clearly that desired solutions, long term or short term, are already in the hands of schools themselves.

10.2 A range of responses indicated the need for greater consistency across Northern Ireland where that may be achievable, in, for example:

- clear, firm direction on what may be acceptable in term-time absences, and how they are recorded in legitimately different categories;
- co-ordination in messages to parents, together with lower thresholds for action; (*"reporting 90% as an "average" is counter-productive because it is not good enough"*);
- strong multi-agency support for families with a persistent long-term absence history;

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.extern.org>

<sup>10</sup> <http://familyworksni.com>

- more home-school liaison personnel (school-based, but possibly shared across local areas);
- a concerted message, in a renewed strategy, from opinion-formers across society, at all levels, about the value and high quality of schooling in Northern Ireland.

## 11. Summary

Although it is impossible to make a *causal* link between the strategies outlined here and improvements in academic attainment, the evidence is that a relentless focus on promoting attendance can help to break the cycle of deprivation and raise standards.

The outcome of the ETI analysis indicates that those schools which adopt an holistic approach, effect improvement best of all. Such schools do not regard poor attendance as an inconveniently chronic and fundamentally unfixable problem, but rather as a symptom that indicates that they are, in some way, failing to meet the needs of all of the young people.

These school leaders take responsibility for prioritising good attendance and building a culture which makes the intrinsic link between attendance and attainment in the minds of staff, pupils and parents alike. They review and revise the curriculum offered, and evaluate and improve teaching to ensure that it is engaging for all learners, ensuring that they want to come to school for fear of missing out.

They have a clear strategy for monitoring relevant data closely and evaluating and reporting on the effectiveness of actions taken to promote improvement. When attendance drops they act quickly, engaging directly and immediately with parents, carers and intervene as necessary with the help of the appropriate external agencies. And, while they are clear with parents and carers about the sanctions available for absence and do resort to extrinsic rewards, which recognise and prize good attendance, they recognise that such strategies have a limited value in the medium to long term.

## Methodology

The ETI carried out an online survey with schools on their attendance policy and practice.

The survey was hosted on Survey Monkey and all primary, post-primary and special schools received the link via email using the DE C2k distribution list. The survey issued on 2 October 2015, with a completion date of 23 October 2015. A reminder was issued on 16 October.

The questions produced both quantitative and qualitative data, generally using yes/no and multiple response questions as well as open-ended response types. Only one response per school was accepted. A total of 343 responses were received from a total of 1,084 schools (as defined at 26 February 2015), representing a response rate of 31.6% which breaks down, as follows:

<b>School Type</b>	<b>Response rate (% school type)</b>
<b>Primary</b>	28.3%
<b>Post-primary</b>	43.3%
<b>Non-grammar</b>	38.6%
<b>Grammar</b>	52.9%
<b>Special</b>	40.0%
<b>Total</b>	31.6%

In addition, a team of inspectors and associate assessors (AAs) made half-day visits to 45 schools (listed below) to delve more closely into policy and practice using a semi-structured case-study scaffold. The schools which were visited are thanked for assisting the ETI and the AAs in preparing case studies as follows:

Primary	22
Post-primary	20
Special/EOTAS	3



### **Primary schools visited**

Blythefield Primary School  
Botanic Primary School  
Cedar Integrated Primary School  
Christ the King Primary School, Omagh  
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School  
Currie Primary School  
Denamona Primary School, Fintona  
Fane Street Primary School  
Holy Child Primary and Nursery School, Derry  
Holy Family Primary School, Belfast  
Holy Family Primary School, Teconnaght  
Lislagan Primary School  
Lowwood Primary School  
Nettlefield Primary School  
Newtownstewart Primary School  
Queen Elizabeth Primary School  
St Joseph's Primary School, Slate Street  
St Kevin's Primary School, Belfast  
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor  
St Malachy's Primary School, Camlough  
St Malachy's Primary School, Castlewellan  
St Patrick's Primary School and Nursery Unit, Newry  
St Patrick's Primary School, Newry  
St Ronan's Primary School, Newry  
Vincent de Paul Primary School

### **Post-primary schools visited**

Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School  
Belfast Model School for Girls  
Crumlin Integrated College  
De La Salle High School, Downpatrick  
Dominican College, Fortwilliam  
Dunclug College  
Erne Integrated College  
Killicomaine Junior High School  
Little Flower Girls' School  
Lurgan College  
Malone College  
Markethill High School  
Mount Lourdes Grammar School  
Royal School Armagh  
St Brigid's College, Derry  
St Catherine's College  
St Colman's College, Newry  
St Killian's College  
St Mary's College, Derry  
St Mary's High School, Newry  
St Mary's High School, Downpatrick  
St Patrick's College, Banbridge  
St Patrick's High School, Keady

### **Special schools visited**

Castletower Special School  
Clarawood Special School Belfast  
Harberton Special School Belfast

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