

New measures to increase school attendance

New proposals to tackle the postcode lottery of avoidable absence in schools have been announced by the government today.

A new consultation proposes that all schools have robust policies detailing how they will support pupils to attend as regularly as possible and sets out how legal intervention including penalty notices should be used in promoting good attendance by local authorities.

The number of pupils persistently absent increased to 501,642 in secondary schools in autumn 2020, compared with 454,167 in 2019, not including non-attendance in covid circumstances.

The latest data shows a radically different approach to sanctions across the country, with some local authorities issuing no fines in 2020/21, while others issued over 1,500. The new standards will make sure interventions such as fines are always used when all other options have been explored.

Although the pandemic is still present and causing some unavoidable absence amongst teachers and staff, it has highlighted the importance of regular face-to-face education to allow all pupils to fulfil their potential.

Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said:

I want every single child to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, which only time in school with this country's world-class teachers can bring. That's why I will continue to give schools the tools they need to keep pupils in class, whether that's support with ventilation, testing or vaccinations, which all remain so vital.

And as we transition from pandemic to endemic, it makes me even more determined to fight for children to be in school every day they possibly can be.

Absence due to Covid is unavoidable, but there are other reasons children miss out on school too. Our new proposals will end the postcode lottery of how attendance is managed in different schools and parts of the country, and make sure every child and family gets the best possible support to attend school as regularly as possible.

Schools Minister Robin Walker said:

The time pupils spend in classrooms, with their friends and with

our world class teachers, is fundamental to their development, education and the opportunities they have to succeed. We know that Covid has led to some unavoidable absences from school but that makes it even more important to reduce avoidable absence.

So whether it's through the support we are providing to schools to keep children learning face-to-face through the pandemic, or the proposals we have published today to help drive down avoidable absence in the medium and longer term, I will continue to do everything in my power to help make sure every young person can benefit from being in school, day in day out.

Today's consultation comes as the latest school attendance statistics show 99.9% of schools are open, with 87.4% of pupils attending.

The Government continues to prioritise face-to-face education for pupils and confirmed yesterday that all schools that submitted eligible applications for an air purifier will receive them, alongside additional funding from NHS England to support with delivery of the vaccination programme.

As part of the plans to tackle avoidable absence, local authorities and academy trusts will be expected to have plans for how they will provide targeted support for pupils who need it and work with schools to help spread best practice across the school system in driving good attendance.

Schools are also being asked from today to sign up to a new daily attendance data collection trial. Data will be gathered directly from school registers, reducing administrative work and potentially helping schools, academy trusts, local authorities and central government spot and address system-wide issues more quickly if the trial is successful.

The Children's Commissioner is also working with a number of local authorities to review and interrogate their data and step up efforts to support children that are persistently absent from school.

Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza said:

School is the best place for children to be. It's crucial to their academic attainment and is a place they can make friends and play sports. I have always believed in the importance of school and in the largest ever survey of children 'The Big Ask' children themselves how much they enjoy school and all it brings.

I am determined that we must get children back into the classroom. We must find those children who aren't back in school, find out why they aren't attending, and actively help them to find their way back in.

That's why this work is so important, it is crucial to help children recover from the upheaval of the Pandemic and for them to be able to thrive into the future.

The Department's automated daily data collection trial will run over the coming months to assess:

- The quality of the data being collected and how well it allows the government to understand and manage sector-wide attendance trends;
- The potential for it to replace other forms of attendance data collection to reduce burdens on schools; and
- How the data can be made available to schools, trusts and local authorities to help them identify and manage local trends and issues. At all times the Department will manage the data collected in compliance with data protection laws, and the Department's own data protection policies.

The Department remains committed to a registration system for children not in school and will publish the relevant consultation response shortly.