

# New measures to reduce pupil absence

As part of the Education Secretary's commitment to make school attendance his top priority, new expert attendance advisers with decades of first-hand experience are to begin work to reduce pupil absence.

They will work with local authorities and multi-academy trusts who have been identified as having potential to benefit from the support and who want to use the expertise of the advisers to help re-engage persistently absent pupils.

The Department has also identified schools with some of the greatest decreases in absence rates over a five-year period prior to the pandemic, and that have maintained their excellent approach. They will be sharing their approach with other schools in a variety of ways over the coming weeks and months, to help reduce high absence rates.

Schools Minister Robin Walker yesterday (Thursday 25 November) visited one of the schools with above average attendance rates, London Academy, to see their approach first-hand.

He used the visit as an opportunity to call on everyone who works with children, whether that be teachers and headteachers, social workers, youth workers or parents themselves, to help break down barriers to those children being in school.

As recovery from the impact of the pandemic continues, it has never been more important for children to have the maximum possible time with inspirational teachers in a classroom environment that is best for learning and helps them fulfil their potential.

Schools Minister Robin Walker said:

It has been fantastic to see how through a combination of data, proactivity and a focus on children's wellbeing, a school like the London Academy has driven up attendance and reduced persistent absence. Every lesson that we can prevent a child from missing is another building block to their life chances, development and wellbeing.

My department is channelling all its efforts to provide support and guidance to help schools, local authorities and multi-academy trusts take action to increase attendance, and I ask that everyone working with children does everything in their power to help break down any barriers to them attending school.

I recognise that covid is still with us and causing some unavoidable absence – but this is all the more reason that we must all take action to address every avoidable reason for a child not being in school.

The attendance advisors will draw on their expertise as former head teachers and local authority leaders, as well as best practice from across the sector, to support local authorities and school trusts with approaches tailored to their specific needs.

They might advise how data and partnership working can be improved across local areas to identify and support children at risk of persistent absence, or how local authorities can make sure all parts of their services from social workers to housing officers are focused on breaking down barriers to attendance.

Children are passionate about this issue too. Responding to the Children's Commissioner's Big Ask survey, children said they "like school" and they "realised how sitting in front of the computer is no proxy for being with a teacher".

The government is already taking action to address the range of potential barriers to good attendance that children may experience including:

- Making clear that the Pupil Premium and recovery funding, which aims to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, can be used by school leaders, who are best placed to assess their pupils' needs, to improve attendance, as well as other behaviour or social and emotional challenges.
- Investing in two new programmes to support children and young people most at risk of serious violence or gang exploitation to help them stay engaged with their education and out of harm. £45m is being provided for new SAFE (Support, Attend, Fulfil, Exceed) and alternative provision (AP) taskforces, bringing together specialist support in schools and alternative provision settings in serious violence hotspots. The SAFE programme will also deliver targeted interventions to reduce truancy, improve behaviours, and reduce the risk of individuals failing to enter education, employment or training.
- Extending the role of Virtual School Heads – who work to raise educational standards for children in care – so there will be a local champion for children with a social worker in every local authority meaning more targeted support for these children to help improve how they engage with their education.
- Working with families who require early help through our Supporting Families programme, for example with attendance difficulties, but otherwise wouldn't meet the threshold for social care intervention.
- Investing £17 million towards improving mental health and wellbeing support, including £9.5m to offer senior mental health lead training to around a third of all state schools and colleges in 2021/22, helping

them to implement effective holistic approaches to mental health and wellbeing. This is on top of £79 million to increase mental health provision, including more mental health support teams working with schools and colleges.