

Belonging, engaging and participating

A summary of guidance for schools to improve attendance



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Education is important. Going to school and not missing lessons improves:



Communication skills

Learn how to speak, listen, read and write.



Thinking

Solve problems and make decisions.



Life skills

Develop friendships and skills for life.



Your future

Get qualifications for work and life.



Emotional and physical wellbeing

Build confidence and self-esteem.

Good attendance in school can make a big difference to a child's future.
Every moment in school counts and days missed add up quickly.



The Welsh Government wants schools to be fun places to learn, explore and discover new things. Places that learners want to go to.

Most children and young people enjoy school and turn up. But some regularly miss out. When someone is absent, we want schools to know why and support them as much as possible.

This guidance covers:

- why learners are absent
- how schools should check attendance
- how schools can improve attendance
- what happens when attendance doesn't improve.



Covid -19

Since the pandemic some children and young people have not returned to school. In some parts of Wales:

- attendance levels haven't gone back to what they were
- relationships between some parents and schools are worse
- some families have become more casual towards school and learning.



We want this to change. We want schools to promote how important attendance is and the difference it makes.



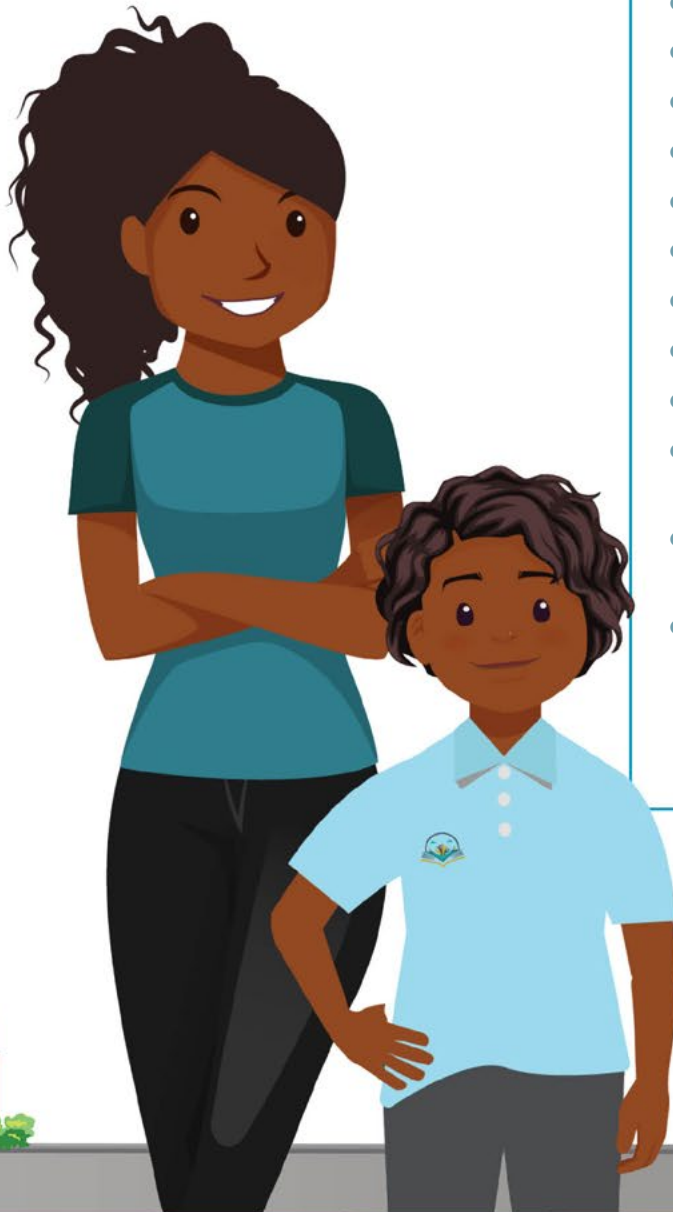
Raising attendance

Some learners miss school because they are sick or something stressful happens in the family. When these things happen, schools should understand and offer support.

But there are other reasons too. Learners might:

- feel unsafe
- feel bullied
- feel unhappy when they are there
- find learning difficult and have additional learning needs
- find it difficult because they have speech, language and communication (SLC) issues
- have money issues or be in poverty
- be worried about exams or schoolwork.

Schools need to know what's going and take steps to improve attendance.



Being absent from school can put learners at risk of harm, especially children and young people:

- who are looked after
- who are young carers
- from ethnic minority communities
- with English or Welsh as an additional language
- from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities
- who are asylum seekers, refugees, new migrants
- who are transgender, non-binary or gender-questioning
- in the youth justice system
- with long-term medical or mental health issues
- who've experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences
- living in temporary accommodation, homeless hostels or bed and breakfasts
- on the child protection register.

It's important children and young people are safe. Schools must check and find out why they are missing school and support them to attend.

 There is advice and guidance here:

- [All Wales attendance framework](#)
- [Guidance on school attendance codes](#)

All children must have an education. The Education Act 1996 says:

- Parents (or carers) must make sure their children have an ‘efficient’ and ‘suitable’ education that meets their needs.
- Local authorities must make sure all children in their area are receiving a suitable education.

Children’s rights

All children have rights set out in the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child.

Article 28 — Children and young people have the right to education no matter who they are.

Article 29 — Children and young people have the right to an education that helps their mind, body and talents be the best they can.

Working together to improve attendance

Making sure children and young people go to school is everybody’s business. We have policies and resources to help, but schools can’t do it alone. It takes everyone working together:

- parents and carers
- foster carers
- governing bodies
- PRUs and Independent Schools
- the Education Welfare Service (EWS)
- local authorities.



Principles and ways of working

This guidance has **8 principles** and ways of working.

1. A learner-centred approach, based on rights

We want schools to put the child first! Support must be built around what the child needs and improve attendance.

2. A strengths-based approach

We want schools to focus on the positives in people's lives. This builds people up and gives support without blaming them for problems.

3. An Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) aware and trauma-informed approach

ACEs — includes abuse, neglect, or growing up in a family with alcohol or drug problems.

Trauma — things happen that cause stress or frightens us and leave a lasting emotional mark.

We want schools to be aware and work to support children in the right ways.

4. A focus on learner wellbeing and mental health

We want schools to help support mental health and wellbeing.

5. A whole-school approach

We want schools to look at all their systems and ways of working to see how they can improve attendance.

6. A focus on building positive relationships and school culture

We want schools to build strong, positive relationships with learners and their families. When children and young people feel like they connect and belong they want to go to school.

7. A focus on family engagement

We want schools to have lots of opportunities for parents to talk about attendance.

8. A focus on prevention and support

We want schools to follow the five ways of working set out in The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. They are:

- **Long-term** — make a commitment to improving attendance.
- **Prevention** — spot issues, step in quickly and give the right support.
- **Integration** — look at all parts of school life — the whole-school.
- **Collaboration** — work with learners, parents and other services.
- **Involvement** — listen, respect and involve learners and families.



School attendance plans, policies and practices

A school attendance strategy (plan)

Every school should have a school attendance strategy. It should set out clearly:

- the school's vision and ethos
- the responsibilities of governors, teachers, learners and parents
- how they'll help learners feel engaged, interested and happy in school
- how they'll handle issues
- what support is available
- how they aim to improve attendance.

Schools should:

- include everyone in developing the strategy
- link it other school plans, including wellbeing plans and child protection plans
- make it easy to understand and available for everyone
- check and update it regularly.

Leadership and governors

Good leadership and governors make a big difference to the life of a school. They are responsible for:

- making sure the school is a place learners want to go to
- improving attendance
- giving clear messages about how attendance improves wellbeing and outcomes
- training so everyone knows how to improve attendance.

Keeping children safe

Being absent from school may be a sign that a child is at risk. Schools should know why a child is absent and work with:

- the schools designated safeguarding person
- the Education Welfare Officer (EWO).

If they think a child is in danger they should phone the police immediately.

Pupil voice and school councils

Learners should be involved in decisions about school life. Being involved helps learners feel like they belong and want to go to school.

Staff development

All staff should know about:

- the school attendance strategy
- training opportunities
- their responsibility to support learners and manage attendance.



Recording and checking attendance

Taking the register

Schools must take an attendance register twice a day, so they know:

- who is missing day-by-day
- if anyone goes missing during the day
- patterns of behaviour — if a learner's missing some lessons, some parts of the day or times of the year.

Schools should make sure that teachers and staff know:

- how to record and check attendance
- who to report absences to
- what to do if they think a child is at risk.

Electronic systems

Some schools use electronic attendance registers. This helps them collect and check attendance quickly. The school must make paper copies at least once a month, so records don't get lost.



Authorised and unauthorised absence

The school register must show if a learner is:

- present
- taking part in off-site activities (treated as present)
- absent — authorised or unauthorised
- not required to attend (because of school closure).

If the child is absent, it must show if it's:

- **Authorised** — the school has given approval in advance for the absence.
- **Unauthorised** — the school hasn't given approval.

Holidays in term time and extended overseas trips

Parents should apply in advance to take holidays or overseas trips in term time. But the school doesn't have to agree to it.

If the school doesn't agree and the family goes anyway, it's an unauthorised absence.

A school can authorise absences for up to 10 days in a school year.

If a child is away for longer than agreed, it's an unauthorised absence.

Recording and checking attendance

Part-time timetables

Sometimes part-time school hours can help a learner reconnect after a long absence. Part-time timetables should be part of a bigger plan that includes:

- a written agreement with parents and services
- the hours and times that the learner is in school
- information on how the learner will be safe when they aren't in school
- the support given
- how the learner will get a full-time education
- any contact with Education Other Than At School services
- transport arrangements.

Flexi-schooling

This is when a child goes to school some days and is home educated the rest of the time. The learner is on the school register, and when they are at home it's marked as an authorised absence.

Study leave

Some schools give learners days off to prepare for exams. This shouldn't be more than 15 days.

Learners from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

Schools should be aware of the culture and lifestyle of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Schools should be sensitive, try to find a balance and work to support the learner. If the family are travelling the school can give an authorised absence. If there are concerns about a child's safety, the school should investigate.

Education other than in school EOTAS

EOTAS teams support learners who are not in school due to behavioural reasons or long-term illness. These teams can work in Pupil Referral Units, colleges, independent schools or hospitals.

Learners have to attend these sessions but stay registered at their school. This is an authorised absence.

If the learner is absent or misses EOTAS lessons the school is told. This is an unauthorised absence and the school should investigate.

Dual registering

If learners move between areas for family reasons, they might be registered at two schools. Both schools should work together to make sure the learner is getting a full-time education. If they don't attend either school when they're meant to, it's an unauthorised absence.



✓ Removing learners from the register



A school can only remove a child's name from their register if:

- the learner has moved area and is registered at another school
- the parent has given written notice that their child is being home educated
- the learner is certified by a medical officer as unable to attend school
- the learner has been absent for over four weeks and the local education officer don't know where they are
- the learner has died
- the learner has been permanently excluded and the family aren't going to appeal.

Schools have to tell the local authority when and why a child's name has been taken off the register. This helps the local authority know if the child is getting a suitable education or if they need to investigate.

If schools are concerned, they should contact the Local Safeguarding Children's Board. If schools think a child is in danger, they should contact the police immediately.

Young offenders

Young offenders should only be taken off the register if the school knows they're going into prison for over four months or they won't be returning.

There is advice for schools in: [The Education \(Pupil Registration\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2010](#)

✓ Stepping in early

Schools have a lot of information about learners' lives and should use it to offer the right support. It could be short-term help in the classroom to improve learning or more specialist support from other services.

On day one

Parents should let schools know as soon as possible why their child is absent from school.

If parents don't contact the school, the school should contact them on the first day.

Contacting parents quickly:

- shows families the school is concerned and cares
- checks parents know their child is absent and helps keep them safe
- helps the school know if there are any issues and they need to support the learner
- stops longer absences.

Returning to school

When learners return to school after a long absence they need to know that the school is glad to see them. Schools should:

- welcome learners back and encourage attendance
- provide support to catch up on learning
- have weekly check-ins to discuss issues and progress
- keep contact with parents
- discuss support.

Excluded children returning to school

The headteacher should meet with the parents and agree how the child will return to school. This should happen 15 days before the child returns. It gives everyone an opportunity to talk and agree on support that improves attendance.



Schools can get help to support learners in many ways, including:

- **Counselling services** — Local authorities have counselling services for children and young people aged 11-18. Schools can also refer learners to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services).
- **Youth services** — Youth workers can support young people and help develop wellbeing.
- **Careers guidance** — Careers Wales can help young people with advice so they stay engaged in education.

Other services

Schools should work with other services to help learners improve attendance and overcome barriers to learning:

- **Family Information Services** offers information and advice for families.
- **Families First** supports families living in poverty.
- **Parenting. Give it time** provides positive parenting information, advice and support.

There is other support too:



Nurture Groups — Some schools have nurture groups — These small groups help children feel safe and support the move back into the main classroom.

Support for Healthcare needs — Governing bodies and schools should make sure learners with extra healthcare needs get an education including trips and activities. If the learner is in hospital, the local authority should arrange a suitable education.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance support — Some learners find it emotionally difficult to be at school. Schools should work with families to make it easier for them to attend. This can include looking at allowing a part-time timetable or a late start or early finish to their school day.

Transport support — Parents have to make sure their child gets to school. Local authorities offer free school transport to families who live a certain distance from school or are on low incomes to help attendance.



Working together and connecting with parents

Schools should work with parents and encourage them to:

- take an active interest in their child's school life and work
- attend parent's evenings and other school events
- be aware of school communications, including letters their child brings home
- make sure their child only misses school for reasons which are unavoidable or agreed
- tell the school of any absence as soon as possible, preferably on the first morning
- confirm this in writing when the child returns to school
- avoid booking family holidays during term-time
- talk to the school if they are concerned that their child doesn't want to go to school.

Involving parents can help build a trusting relationship. It helps them know their child is cared about and improves attendance.

Family engagement officers

Some schools have dedicated non-teaching staff who engage with families. These staff should be aware of community life, the challenges learners face and have experience of working with vulnerable learners.

Parent voice and parent councils

Some schools have parent councils or forums to involve them in decisions and discuss issues.

Community-focused schools

A community-focused school works with parents and invites them to:

- connect to support
- take part in projects and activities
- continue learning and take exams
- develop skills, including reading and writing skills
- get involved in community life and decisions.

They also help parents and learners feel proud of their school. This can help them feel more connected, able to discuss concerns and ask for support. This improves attendance.



Managing absence

If schools have tried everything possible but attendance doesn't improve, they must contact the Education Welfare Service.

This starts a formal process to manage absence.

School makes a referral to the Education Welfare Service.

An Education Welfare Officer contacts the family through house visits and telephone calls.

After talking with the family and learner attendance to be monitored. If no improvement after 2-3 weeks, a letter may be sent highlighting concerns.

Throughout the process, communication is kept open and a meeting is arranged. Attendance is monitored for 2-3 weeks after the meeting.

If the meeting is not attended by the parent/s or carer/s, a second letter is sent offering the opportunity to reschedule another one.

Is attendance still a concern?

If the absences are unauthorised by the school, the family is sent an Official Warning and the situation reviewed in 4 weeks.

If absences are authorised by school, then a Pre-warning is to be sent and reviewed in 2-4 weeks.

Pre-warning - no improvement = Official Warning

If the Official Warning fails and there's no improvement, it goes to a Fixed penalty notice or court prosecution.



Parenting contracts

The Education Welfare Service and school governing bodies can suggest using parenting contracts. The contract will agree what support is being given and what the parents are agreeing to do. If the parent fails or refuses to follow the contract, then the local authority can take action.

Fixed penalty notices

When the Education Welfare Service and the school has done everything they can but attendance still doesn't improve, they can issue a warning to parents explaining that further action will be taken. Parents should be given 15 days to improve their child's attendance. If attendance still doesn't improve, they can issue a fixed penalty notice. This is a fine and should only be used when necessary.

Education Supervision Orders

The Local Authority can apply to a court for an Education Supervision Order. If the court agrees, the Supervising Officer will visit the family and work with the family to improve the child's attendance at school. This usually stays in place for 12 months but can be made longer.

Prosecuting parents

The Local Authority can prosecute parents if they continue to fail to make sure their child attends school. If they are successful, the court can issue a Parent Order and a fine.

Schools work hard to avoid legal action but attendance at school can make a real difference to a child's future. It's important!

Thanks for reading this

You can read the full guidance here:

gov.wales/improving-school-attendance

